

**INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' USE OF SOCIAL NETWORK SITES FOR
COLLEGE CHOICE ACTIVITIES AND DECISION MAKING**

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I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Mark Rekhter, M.D., Ph.D.

Thank you for always encouraging me to persist, believing in me,
listening to my endless self-doubts, always finding words of reassurance,
and for being by my side all the way. I also dedicate this dissertation to my sons Ilya and
Misha, who inspired me by their own successes, intelligence, and dedication.

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INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS USE OF SOCIAL NETWORK SITES FOR COLLEGE CHOICE ACTIVITIES AND DECISION MAKING

What are the effective ways to attract international students to your campus? One approach is to learn how foreign students obtain information that impacts their college choice decision. This need determined the goal of this study to explore the Social Network Site (SNS) component of a foreign student's college decision-making process.

This qualitative study was conducted among undergraduate students from Russia State University for Humanities (RSUH). Participant selection was made through a questionnaire aimed to identify students who were in different stages of making a decision regarding transferring to a HEI abroad. The data analysis procedure was informed by the work of Creswell (2002) and Glaser and Strauss (1967).

Participants reported that language (Russian) and convenience were among the highest motivating factors for membership in specific SNS. The benefits of SNS included opportunities for instantaneous connections with individuals of similar interests; unbiased and multidimensional views presented by SNS members. Respondents searched SNSs for information about majors, culture norms abroad, cost of education, and careers after graduation. They were applying SNS-specific criteria, such as the number of SNS' "likes", followers, and the ratio of followers to following, to evaluate HEIs' worthiness.

One of the emerging study findings was that participants with no connections abroad relied exclusively on SNSs for their college choice decisions. These individuals acknowledged that without SNSs they would not consider an opportunity to transfer to an HEI abroad, as they had no channels for obtaining such information. For participants with connections abroad, the

advice of their international contacts played a major role in their college choice and SNSs played a supportive role.

Limitations related to the use of SNS included dearth of current research, minimal control over content posted by third parties, time constraints related to mastering SNS features and maintaining a meaningful content. Recommendations for overcoming these obstacles and strengthening HEI professionals' connections with international students include developing fluency and expertise in different features of various SNSs or hiring individuals with proven expertise in SNS; creating consistent and meaningful content on various SNS platforms, and conducting more research about the use of SNS by international students.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

For many decades, higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States have attracted international students from around the world. The rationale for recruiting international students has been determined by a variety of factors and interest groups. Many researchers have agreed that one of the main factors is financial: Higher tuition fees paid by the majority of international students, particularly undergraduate students, provide HEIs with new fiscal opportunities and financial benefits (Alberts, 2007; Altbach, 1997, 2004; American Council on Education [ACE], 2009; Appaduri, 2000). In the 2012-2013 academic year, 819,644 international students were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities (Open Door, 2014). The second factor is a need to cultivate foreign graduates who can become U.S. political and business emissaries in their home countries (Alladin, 1992; Blumenthal, 1996; Koch & Green, 2009).

The third factor belongs to a more amorphous movement “to ‘internationalize’ campuses in the context of an increasingly globalized world” (Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, & Rhoades, 2006, p. 528). Some researchers have identified “campus internationalization” as the acquisition of the global culture competencies, others as competencies required by the modern labor force. Yet, there is another group that views campus internationalization as an opportunity to bring the brightest young minds from around the world into U.S. classrooms and expose domestic students to diverse ideas, experiences, and ways of thinking (ACE, 2009; Blight, Davis, & Olsen, 2000; Council on International Education Exchange [CIEE], 2006; Koch & Green, 2009; Naidoo, 2010; Vincent-Lancrin, 2011). Finally, the fourth factor, according to the report from the

Government Accountability Office (GAO; 2009), is the United States' historical reliance on "international students to fill critical skill gaps in the economy and, in particular, in science, math, engineering, and technology fields" (pp. 8-9).

The factors that motivate foreign students to study overseas are equally complex. Scientists describe them as a "push-pull" model. The "push" factors are forces within students' country of origin that motivate the outflow of students. These could include political repressions, inadequate financial rewards associated with obtaining higher levels of education, undeveloped economy and low financial wealth, lack of educational opportunities, social and political issues, and the low priority placed on education by the country's government. "Pull" factors are forces within the host country that draw students to a specific country or a university abroad. Among these "pull" factors are higher quality of life; greater educational opportunities; "awareness" of the country's opportunities that come from friends, family members, and acquaintances; and more lucrative economic rewards associated with obtaining education in the HEIs of this specific country (Altbach, 2004; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992). This push-pull model presents major political, economic, and social components that shape international students' entrance to higher education in the US. Some pull factors, such as referrals from friends and relatives, institutional prestige, reputation, and a cost-benefit ratio, are often interconnected with the choice of a higher education institution abroad.

Push factors are usually beyond the control of HEI officers. At the same time, there are many strategies aimed at using pull factors to inform international students and to connect with them. One of the newer strategies for attracting international students is through the use of social media or social networks (the terms are often used

interchangeably), which allows for mass socializing online “through words, pictures, and videos” (Reuben, 2008, p. 1). This trend had been gaining momentum for two major reasons: students’ early exposure to online forms of communication and the strong infiltration of social networking into people’s daily lives. Current students are often called a “wired generation” due to their constant connections to phones, the Internet, instant messaging, and social networks, “perhaps all in the same device” (Barnes & Mattson, 2010, p. 1). Nielsen Online, an analytics firm that tracks social network activities, estimated the reach of social media to be over 750 million active users from around the world, with 262,001,960 users being between ages of 16 and 25 (Bennett, 2012).

Undoubtedly, the availability of hyper-connections and constant communications portals has been “fast and furiously” changing the way teenagers and young adults acquire, process, analyze, and react to information. However, still little is known about the circumstances that surround the use of social network sites (SNSs) by students, particularly international students; even less information is available about students’ use of SNSs for specific purposes, including selecting their college of choice.

Problem Statement

The decision-making process and the level of individual and family commitment related to an international student’s choice to study abroad are somewhat similar to the college choice activities of a domestic student, but possess some unique defining features. On the one hand, the process involves steps that are described in the Hossler and Gallagher (1989) college choice model: predisposition (to study abroad), search for information, and choice of an HEI abroad. On the other hand, enrolling in an institution

outside of one's home country, moving away from family and other support networks, learning a new culture, and adjusting to different academic circumstances require a somewhat different set of activities. In some instances, these factors also pose unanticipated obstacles upon enrollment and even result in the decision "to remain in the home country" (Lee et al., 2006, p. 551).

One way to assist international students during their college choice process is by communicating and connecting with them through SNSs, which allows for immediate, real-time, and direct communication. This type of communication can help international students make better educated and informed decisions. HEI enrollment personnel are cognizant to the challenges faced by international students and recognize the importance of information and communication. In order to better connect with international students and facilitate their decision-making processes, personnel of HEI enrollment offices need to gain insight into students' decision-making processes, particularly their strategies for collecting information about HEIs abroad (including the trend of using SNSs), and master competencies in developing culturally relevant content (Missy, 2011; Thostenson, 2011).

This study aimed to address this issue. It was grounded in the study of college choice and reviewed push-pull factors, the impact of friends and family, and the influence of SNSs on the college choice decisions of international transfer students. Learning about these features from the students' perspectives, particularly as these activities relate to the students' college search and choice phases (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), could assist in creating SNS content that could, on the one hand, make HEIs more attractive to international students and, on the other hand, make students' choices better informed and more accurate.

It is also important to notice, that the skyrocketing evolution of SNSs and breathtaking speed of their development surpasses the corresponding research. Currently, the majority of information is available through secondary sources, such as blogs, Internet discussions, forums, and various online media sites. This factor portrays the paucity of scientific research about the use of SNSs in higher education. Greater insight is needed about the intent, strategies, tactics, and effectiveness of SNSs in different areas of higher education, including college recruitment.

Purpose of Study, Goal of Study, and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the “social networking behavior” of college-bound international students. As was mentioned earlier, social networking and social network sites are relatively new—less than a decade old—and a constantly evolving phenomena; there is a dearth of research related to their role in human life in general and their role in higher education in particular. A specific study in a specific institution can begin to add to a body of knowledge related to the use of SNSs in higher education.

This study sought to determine how international students from a specific university in Russia use SNSs in their decision-making process after they have made the decision to study abroad and are selecting a higher education institution abroad. A qualitative case study approach was chosen for several reasons. First, the qualitative research approach assists in understanding a particular behavior by exploring and analyzing the actions and interpretations of the participants in their natural setting (Creswell, 2002; Schwandt, 2007). Indeed, this study focused on exploring the action of one social group—freshmen, sophomore, and junior students from three departments of

the Russian State University of Humanities (RSUH) in Moscow who are planning to transfer to HEIs abroad in order to continue their higher education. Within this social group, I aimed to discover and analyze how these students use SNSs for making decisions about which specific HEI to attend in the US. The participants were interviewed in RSUH, in their natural setting, and were asked to describe their experiences with SNSs for obtaining information about HEIs abroad.

To meet this goal, this study aimed to answer the following supportive questions:

1. What SNSs did students of Russia State University for Humanities (RSUH) use for their college choice activities?
2. What type of information on SNSs is being used by RSUH students for their college choice activities?
3. Were there any connections between type of information available on SNSs and RSUH students' choice of HEI in the US?

I used interviews for a deeper understanding of how students use SNSs for their college choice, what types of sites they favor, and what content they are exploring. This could help in gaining insight into international students' use of SNSs in their decision-making process related to college choice and, hopefully, in improving the content of institutional SNSs to assist students in their college choice activities.

Organization of the Dissertation

The first chapter provided a review of the primary reasons for HEIs' interest in recruiting international students and outlined factors that encourage young men and women to leave their countries of origin and seek educational opportunities abroad. It

also indicated that SNSs have been gaining momentum as tools for reaching out to prospective international students.

In the second chapter, a review of literature will highlight four different areas: (a) a history of SNSs and their link to HEIs' recruitment of international students; (b) the impact of Internet availability, affordability, and speed on the increase in the number of SNSs users across the globe, resulting in a larger share of international students in HEIs in the US; (c) a theory that portrays international students' decision-making process to seek educational opportunities abroad; and (d) forces that shape the mobility of students from Russia into HEIs in the US and trends in using SNSs. The third chapter will present the methodology for this study. The fourth chapter will present and analyze the data collected, and the fifth chapter will provide a discussion and interpretation of the findings and will evaluate possible future implications.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Disclosure

Because social networking and its use for the recruitment of international students is a new and constantly changing area, the amount of available empirical work and research associated with it is limited. Therefore, in addition to drawing information from primary sources, this researcher intended to draw information from a variety of secondary sources, including blogs, web reports, web posts and comments, web group discussions, forums, Twitter, Pinterest, Facebook, Instagram, Askbook, Quora, Tumblr, VKontakte, Google+, videos, newspaper articles, and similar sources.

Part I. College Choice Model

This research was grounded in the study of college choice. Drawing on empirical models of college choice, this study examined how SNSs assist international transfer students from Russia in identifying potential HEIs abroad to consider attending and how they help students to make their final decision regarding which college they will attend in the United States.

Current literature appears to identify several college choice models, among them econometric, consumer, sociological, and combined. The econometric model examines how college choice is made based on anticipated economic returns and emphasizes a cost-benefit analysis. It includes the opportunity cost of lost income, tuition and other expenses, career opportunities, availability of funds, and estimated income after earning a degree (Anderson, Bowman, & Tinto, 1972; Becker, 1975; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Palmer, Park, & Hossler, 2012). The consumer model is focused on describing potential students as consumers of the commodity referred to as a college education

(Kusumawati, Yanamandram, & Perera, 2010). The sociological or status attainment model describes how interactions with peers and family members, as well as high school experiences and environment, can shape college choice decisions (Hossler et al., 1999; Hossler & Stage, 1992). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) also discussed a combined model which utilizes more than one stage of the college choice activities to explain the college choice process. This integrated model combines elements of the economic and status attainment models, including the family, social, economic, and institutional contexts (Hemsley-Brown & Foskett, 2001). It presents college choice as an integrated process that includes three stages—predisposition, search, and choice—and, as of today, is the mostly widely used college choice model. I will discuss Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) combined model in more detail, and for the purpose of this dissertation study, will focus most closely on Phase II (search) and Phase III (choice) of the model.

Predisposition phase. The first stage—predisposition—describes how students arrive at the decision to continue their education after high school (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). As early as secondary school, children start thinking about what they are going to do after graduation, and as early as the ninth grade, many students begin to take steps to achieve their postsecondary aspirations (Akos, Lambie, Milsom, & Gilbert, 2007). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Hossler and Palmer (2008) described many factors that influence students' college predisposition, including gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, student academic ability, and peer influence. They also asserted that parental encouragement is one of the strongest predictors of students' early development of postsecondary education plans; it may include discussing with children their postsecondary plans and saving money to help

children achieve their goals (Hossler & Palmer, 2008). Researchers identified a positive correlation between parents' consistent efforts to encourage children to go to college and children's aspirations to pursue postsecondary education (Cabrera, Burkum, & La Nasa, 2005).

Search phase. In the second stage, students begin searching information about colleges (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, Terenzini et al., 2001). The search stage describes how students discover and evaluate potential colleges. Students employ various strategies during the second stage of the college decision-making process. Among the most frequent strategies and sources of information are campus visits, meetings with admissions counselors, advice from students who are already enrolled in college, web searches, brochures, college ranking publications, and private college counselors (Daun-Barnett & Das, 2013; Hossler et al., 1999; Kinzie et al., 2004). During this phase, prospective students formulate a list of educational options (McDonough, 2006). Literature also suggests that they start to rely less on their parents' opinions and move toward other information sources, such as college counselors, teachers, and so forth (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 2006). Information gathering is one of the activities of the search phase (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Some perspective college students request information about HEIs through social media sources such as Facebook and Twitter (Avery, Glickman, Hoxby, & Metrick, 2013), while others follow more traditional paths. There is extensive literature describing the roles of race, gender, ethnicity, family, and socioeconomic status as they pertain to the college search information gathering phase. This study is focused on one group – international students-

and the searches and interactions on different social media platforms in which they are engaged.

Choice phase. The third stage describes the final matriculation decision. The college campus culture, socioeconomic status of the student, parental encouragement, ethnicity of the student, individual preferences of the student, and an HEI's attributes and college communication are important factors that impact perspective students' final choice about what particular HEI to attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Mathew, 2016; Zimbhoff, 2005). According to Mathew (2016), the most important aspect of this part of the decision-making process includes "narrowing the range of choices by identifying alternatives, determining criteria for evaluation, then using the criteria of evaluation to make a choice" (p. 17). Therefore, a better understanding of these factors as they pertain to international students' college choice behavior and practices, particularly as they relate to the second stage of the decision making (i.e., searching for the information) are among the important components of strengthening international enrollment practices.

The Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model has been the dominant conceptual framework used to describe the major stages students go through during the process of making a college choice decision and entering institutions of postsecondary education. However, questions remain regarding the college choice process; for instance, how do international students navigate the college choice process and make a decision about what HEI abroad to attend? In the following section, I will discuss research literature on the college choice processes of international students. Specifically, I will focus on the literature that describes the use of SNSs as one of the instruments that assists international students in their search and choice phases.

Part II. International Students

International students' college choice.

Push-pull model. Conceptual framework.

Push factors. Many studies that have focused on attributes that influence international students' decision to study abroad have identified similar motivating factors regardless of students' country of origin or learning destinations. These factors can be combined into a "push-pull" model (Bodycott, 2009; Chen, 2008; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Sountar, 2002; McMahon, 1992; Vrontis, Thrassou, & Melanthiou, 2007). The "push" factors are forces which originate within a student's country of birth and include political, economic, and social motives. Among them are political repressions, inadequate financial rewards associated with obtaining a higher level of education, an undeveloped or underdeveloped country's economy and low financial wealth, low per capita income, lack of educational opportunities, social inequalities, low quality of education, and a low priority placed on education by the country's government (Chen, 2008; Lee, 1996; Lee et al., 2006; Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992). The most common push factor is a home country's lack of capacity for higher education. Indeed, the global demand for higher education is "projected to grow from 97 million students in 2000 to 263 million in 2025" (Ruby, 2005, p. 234), making access to higher education opportunities more restricted and uneven among individual countries and entire continents (Blight et al., 2000). These push factors, individually or combined, motivate students to leave their country and look for educational opportunities overseas and as such can be compared with the predisposition phase of a college choice model.

Pull factors. Once the decision to leave the country of origin to pursue educational opportunities has been made, students have to select a country of study. During this stage, the “pull” factors—forces within the host country—begin to play a substantial role. They include, but are not limited to, a host country’s quality of life and educational opportunities, more lucrative economic rewards associated with obtaining education in this specific country, ease with which a visa can be obtained, and the overall level of knowledge and awareness related to the host country in the student’s country of origin (Altbach, 2004; Chen, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992).

Altbach’s (2004) quote can serve as a summary of these observations. A significant number of international students go abroad to study with the aim of staying in the host country to work and build a career. The US is a major attractor of these students because of its large and diverse economy, the willingness of employers to hire well-qualified foreigners, and the high salary available in many fields, including academe. It is difficult to quantify this motivation, but the nonreturn rates of students from several key-sending countries are indicative. Estimates of Chinese and Indian students choosing not to return home after their study in the US, for example, range from 66-92% and 77-88%, respectively (Altbach, 2004, p. 4).

Four “Ps.” In addition to a host country’s “pulling” force, there are factors associated with specific institutions. One of the factors is price: monetary and social costs such as “fees, living expenses, travel costs, crime, safety, and racial discrimination” (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 84). An additional factor is place: HEIs’ physical and academic environments and conditions, perceived academic rigor, and faculty involvement (Chen, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Shanka, Quintal, & Taylor, 2005).

Other factors include prestige and ranking (Lee et al., 2006), as well as promotion: “referrals or personal recommendations that the study destination received from parents, relative, friends and other ‘gatekeepers’” (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 85). These “gatekeepers” are sometimes U.S. students who, while studying abroad themselves, bond with their local peers, talk about their home universities, and influence their foreign friends’ opinions as they are selecting universities in the US (O’Hara, 2009), or international students who already study at HEIs abroad (Bourke, 2000).

However, it is unclear how the Facebook environment incorporates “push-pull” factors into connecting international students’ interests with specific higher education institutions. This observation determined the research question and the goal of this paper. The push-pull model examines the college choice process for international students who elected to leave their country of origin and study abroad. However, it is important to understand how students gather and process information to make a college choice decision (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999).

International students as transfer students. To better understand international students’ process of entry into universities in the US, it is important to recognize that some of them, particularly undergraduate students, enroll as transfer students. Transfer students can be divided into two categories: horizontal—those transferring from one four-year institution to another—and vertical—those beginning their education at a two-year institution and then transferring credits to a four-year institution (Cuseo, 1998; Ishitani, 2008; McCormick & Carroll, 1997). The majority of international transfer students are horizontal transfers. Horizontal transfers often look like traditional students: They are usually under 24 years of age, enrolled full-time, unmarried, and have no

children; in addition, they are typically financially dependent on their parents and live on campus (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Ishitani, 2008). Their resemblance to traditional students could lead to some similarities between international students' selection processes of HEIs in the US and those of domestic students. However, international undergraduate transfers also face multiple challenges.

First, international transfer students are typically not eligible for the same financial aid options that are available to domestic students. In addition, for international transfer students, education in the US is more expensive because of high out-of-state tuition, the cost of international airfare, and other non-tuition-related expenses (Lu, Mavondo, & Qiu, 2009). These factors can impact international transfer students' choice of higher education abroad. Second, culture differences as well as dissimilarities in the norms and etiquettes of written languages can result in misinterpreting college-related information as well as difficulties in communicating with HEI admission officers. The situation can also be exacerbated by the availability, speed, and cost of Internet and WiFi connections. These issues can obstruct college-related decision making or lead to misinformed decisions. There exist other concerns as well, including the transferability of credits, overall difficulties of the transfer process, and so forth. However, the use of SNSs does seem to create ground for addressing some of these problems.

Part III. Transfer Students from Russia

Rise and fall: Russian students in the United States. Academic year 1994-1995 marked the first year that a substantial number of students from Russia, specifically 4,832, were admitted to U.S. universities (Open Doors Data, 2011). The following year, that number increased by 15.7%, and then again by 10.9%, reaching its zenith of 7,025

people in academic year 1999-2000. The next decade was marked by a decline in enrollment, with a major drop of 11.3% in 2003-2004 and another of 8.3% in 2004-2005. Today, the HEIs in the US have admitted 4,805 students from Russia, which places Russia among the top 25 countries of origin for international students. The variety of political, economic, legal, financial, and other push-pull factors that influence the dynamic of Russian students in the US are unique and complex.

Pull factors.

America, the beautiful... For the citizens of the Soviet Union, the United States of America had long been a symbiosis of an unattainable dream and a major enemy. On one hand, the overwhelming majority of the Soviet citizens had never been to the US, while the official media and ideological propaganda had created an image of the US as an “evil empire.” On the other hand, morsels of information, such as sparkling city silhouettes in the background of newspaper photographs, stylish clothes, and stories of rare eyewitnesses, were constructing a different and tantalizing reality.

Iron curtains no more. In the 1980s, the situation changed. In December 1985, American journalist Phil Donahue and Russian journalist Vladimir Pozner connected Russians in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) and Americans in Seattle in real time in a broadcast called “The Televised Bridges.” The show served as both a harbinger of the political thaw and a precursor to the upcoming avalanche of information related to the US and the opportunities this country represented.

In the 1990s, American movies, books, clothes, hairstyles, and vocabulary, as well as business firms, educators, and economic and political consultants, flooded Russia. Russian movie theaters were showing predominantly American films (Fedorov, 1996).

The “publishing bust” increased the availability of foreign literature, as well as uncensored coverage of world news from the growing number of newspapers, private broadcasting companies, and magazines. The media primarily demonstrated a fascination with the US, creating a positive, even idealistic image of a country from which the Soviets could and should learn (Lukosiunas, 1991; Richter, 1991).

Another major pull force was represented by Western nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and government agencies that entered Russia in the 1990s. They aimed to contribute financially and intellectually to the advancement of human rights, citizens’ opportunities, information sharing, and social activism. They also offered counseling, direct funding, and administrative support to Russian youth interested in studying at HEIs in the US.

Conclusion. The cultural and political isolation of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, followed by the overabundance of information in the 1980s, made the Russian population in the 1990s ripe for different educational opportunities abroad. Guidance and financial assistance offered by U.S. organizations were helping to make these dreams come true. Additionally, the generation of “fathers” who viewed the US as a forbidden and exciting land could fulfill their dreams by experiencing it through their children and had the means to do so. Moreover, the economic and political changes that followed the demise of the Soviet Union created a “push” environment necessary for the transition.

Push factors. On December 8, 1991, Boris Yeltsin of the Russian Federation, Leonid Kravchuk of Ukraine, and Stanislav Shushkevitch of Belorussia signed the Agreement of the Establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States. On

December 26, 1991, the Russian Federation became the official successor of the Soviet Union.

First, this action resulted in tremendous economic and political instabilities that were “pushing” young men and women out of the country. Second, there emerged a wealthy segment of the population that was financially capable of sending their children to study abroad. Third, the exit visas to leave Russia were dismissed, which allowed citizens to “freely circulate outside of the borders of the Russian Federation and freely return to the Russian Federation” (Federal Law of the Russian Federation, 1991, p. 1).

And now... In today’s Russia, the attributes of American culture are not as fascinating as they once were. In fact, they are often not even associated with the US; rather, they have become part of Russians’ daily routine. They watch reruns of “Sex and the City” on Russian television, check their TV guides for the next NHL and NBA games, and download (often illegally) the music files of the latest American hip-hop or rock sensations. Jack Daniels is served in Moscow bars, and Jeep Cherokees and Lincolns travel down narrow Russian highways (Shiraev & Marhovskaja, 2007, p. 119). Furthermore, the Kremlin cultivates the Russian nationalist idea (Mendelson & Gerber, 2008), which is an easy sell in the framework of the country’s economic growth that fed its national pride. The diminishing fascination toward the US and expanding nationalism are among the reasons why today’s Russian youth have a lessened interest in studying in the US. The phenomena are also coupled with a decline in birth rates, particularly during the time period of 1992 to 1999, a generation that could have been students today (Adomanis, 2013).

At the same time, curtailed freedoms, high corruption, a shift in citizens' sympathies toward opposition, and a slow but steady increase in birth rates (Adomanis 2013; Barry, 2013) serve to maintain the balance. The growing financial capabilities fueled by the rising prices of raw materials and oil (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2010) make educational opportunities in the US more affordable for larger population groups. This combination of push-pull factors makes contemporary Russian youth and their attitudes toward obtaining higher education in the US less unique and more similar to the other 25 top countries of origin for international students.

Summary: Parts I, II, and III

In Part I, I introduced four several college choice models and described Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) foundational three-phase college choice model, which provided the conceptual framework for this dissertation study. I also reviewed how prospective college students in the US gather information about HEIs and what factors influence their decision. In Part II, I discussed the push-pull and "Four Ps" models that describe college choices processes and activities of international students. In Part III, I focused on the dynamics of one group of international students—students from Russia—and discussed factors that influence the presence of these students on U.S. campuses. In the following parts, I will focus on the history and evolution of SNSs and the role they play in campus enrollment management.

Part IV. Social Network Sites: Introduction

Definition. Over the past two decades, many people have had to rethink their connections with and affinities toward others. Since the inception of the Internet in 1991, the ways in which humans communicate, as well as the nature of their professional and

social lives, have been constantly evolving. However, “it was not until the creation of social media interfaces like Facebook, MySpace, Friendster, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, and other similar applications that have we seen such a massive harnessing of the now-pervasive online connectivity in our everyday lives” (Davis, Dail-Amen, Rions-Aguila, & Canche, 2012, p. 3).

There is a seeming abundance of opinions connected with defining this phenomenon called social networking or social media; a simple Google search yielded over 17,000,000 results within .19 s. There are descriptions provided by Wikipedia, different dictionaries, and self-proclaimed subject gurus; there are publications debating the nature of these definitions, discussions about differences and similarities between social media and social networking, studies of major components of social media, views presented by members as well as users and creators of different social groups, and a plethora of other topics and themes. While this public discourse could have provided the basis for a separate study, for the purpose of this work, this researcher opted to adhere to definitions created by scientists with established reputations in the field.

Coyle and Vaughn (2008) described social networking as “a configuration of people connected to one another through interpersonal means such as friendship, common interests, or ideas” (p. 13). While their description is clear, it does not sound contemporary: People have always used different forms of social networking, including those mentioned above. However, the appearance of computers and the Internet allowed individuals to make connections with groups they otherwise would have either no or a very limited opportunity to connect with. In light of that observation, Boyd and Ellison’s

(2007) definition is more inclusive. They used the term social network sites (SNSs), which they defined as

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-private profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211)

The authors also warned against using the word “networking” because networking “is not the primary practice on many of them [SNSs], nor is it what differentiates them from other forms of computer-mediated communication” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). The above attempt seems to be the most focused and all-encompassing. First, it addresses the debate about whether or not social networking represents one aspect of social media or whether social media represents one aspect of social networking (Cavazza, 2008; Falls, 2008). Second, it implies the use of visible profiles and reveals a public display of connections, the potential for interactions, and the capacity to target specific ethnic, religious, professional, sexually-oriented, political, age-related, linguistic, or other identity-driven groups (Boyd & Ellison, 2008)—all features that are associated with SNSs.

History of social network sites and connections with higher education.

SixDegrees. Many trace the beginning of social networking to 1971 when the first e-mail was sent from one computer to another; the computers were sitting in one room, next to each other. However, larger-scale social networking really began in 1997 when SixDegrees.com was launched. It had the majority of features that characterize SNSs today: It allowed users to create profiles, list their friends, and surf their friend

lists. In 2000, the server closed, largely due to the limitations of the Internet geographic penetration and rather narrow scope of allowed activities (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

Blogs. Blogging, another form of SNSs, also started in 1997 as shared online journals and diaries which allow readers to share comments in response to a post. Today, there are approximately 156 million blogs in existence; they are considered an important part of any business's online presence. In higher education, blogs are being actively used for recruitment purposes. Admission offices often encourage students to blog about life on campus in order to give prospective students a "glimpse" into campus life (Curtis, 2013; Harris, 2008). "One quarter of all college admissions officers use blogs by students or campus personnel" (Curtis, 2013; Reuben, 2008, p. 4).

Friendster and MySpace. In 2002, Friendster, a social network site that pioneered the online connection of real-world friends, was opened to the public. In three months, it gained 3 million users, but in a year was overshadowed by MySpace (Curtis, 2013). Many believe that the rise of niche SNSs started in 2003 with the launch of MySpace, although it was originally conceived as a Friendster clone. One of the reasons for the ascendance of MySpace was its popularity among teenagers, mostly because MySpace targeted music bands, promoted popular clubs, and had a policy that allowed minors to join. Eventually it attracted three distinct populations: musician/artists, teenagers, and the recent postcollege crowd (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Large numbers of these users, primarily older siblings of current Facebook users, are still loyal to MySpace. In 2012, MySpace had 300 million registered accounts and approximately 110 million active users, but in a year, this number had declined to 25 million users. Its number of visits declined from 39-45 million visits per month in 2011 (ScottElkin, 2011) to around

20 million in January 2012 (Compete, Inc., 2013; Curtis, 2013). The year 2003 also marked the beginning of LinkedIn, a business-oriented website designed for professional networking. Ten years later, in 2013, its number of users equaled 225 million. Other SNSs that were launched in 2003—Tribe.net, Classmates.com, JAIKU, and NETLOG—enjoyed some popularity, but for a rather short period of time (Bianchi, 2011).

Facebook. Facebook began in 2004 as a Harvard-exclusive SNS. It later expanded to other schools, including high schools, but managed to maintain an exciting exclusivity. Open sign-up does not provide easy access to users in closed networks. Facebook creates an opportunity for building “applications,” allowing users to personalize their profiles, create school profiles, share stores, and compare preferences. By 2008, Facebook overtook MySpace as the leading SNS as determined by the number of monthly network visitors.

In January 2008, there were 420 Facebook pages that had a college or a university in their name. Seventy-three percent of these pages were general marketing pages for the entire school and “14% were connected to sub-groups within the school community” (Anonymous, 2008, p. 1), such as groups of perspective students, specific university programs, groups connecting students by their ethnicity or country of origin, and so forth. People who view HEIs’ pages on Facebook can “Like” them and become their “fans,” which creates “a viral marketing effect” (Reuben, 2008, p.3): Friends are inspired by their friends to join this specific institution. “Facebook also offers organizations the ability to communicate with fans through direct and targeted messages (such as fans in a specific network or age group), and view ‘insights,’ which includes details statistics on the usage of the organization’s page” (Reuben, 2008, p. 3).

According to Facebook statistics, in 2013, Facebook has approximately 1,110,000,000 of monthly active users, 50% of which log on to Facebook daily. On average, each user has 130 friends, 70% of users live outside of the US, and more than 680 million access Facebook through their mobile devices. Worldwide, people spent 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook interacting with pages, groups, events and community groups (Facebook Statistics, 2013). Over 64% of active Facebook users across the world are between 16 and 25 years old (Bennett, 2011). Over 90% of college students have Facebook profiles (Harvard, 2011).

YouTube. YouTube—a SNS for watching and sharing original videos—was registered in 2005. HEIs have been using promotional videos as a recruitment strategy for over 20 years, starting with the invention of VHS tapes. YouTube eliminated the cost of creating video cassettes and/or burning CDs/DVDs, as well as the cost of postage, and tremendously widened the audience of potential students. Today, YouTube exceeds 1 billion monthly users and 4 billion views per day (Citric, 2013); one in every three videos viewed in the US in January 2008 was a YouTube video. Google’s automatic speech recognition technology can translate YouTube videos into 51 world languages, 70% of YouTube viewers live outside of US, and the YouTube player is embedded across over 10 million websites (Website Monitoring Blog, 2010). At least 136 U.S. universities have an education channel on YouTube.

Twitter. Twitter—a combination of an instant messaging and blogging that allows users to share short (140-characters including spaces) posts—was introduced in 2006. On Twitter, users can follow their friends, send friends direct messages, reply publically to the updates, and post questions, comments, pictures, and links—all in real

time (Reuben, 2008; YouTube, 2011). Twitter is often used as a “broadcasting channel rather than a medium for conversations” (UniversitiesandColleges.org, 2011, p. 1). In 2013, the total number of Twitter’s registered users was 500 million, with more than 200 active users; the number of Twitter accounts per U.S. college (accounts that are being initiated by the university personnel with the goal to portray a university) ranges from 24 (University of Florida) to one (University of Denver), the average number being 8.4. Over 70% of the top 100 colleges have at least 10 twitter accounts and 7% have 15 accounts. Harvard University has the largest number of Twitter followers—266,955 people¹—but the average number of HEI Twitter followers is 1,000. In terms of account tracking, the College of William and Mary is in the lead, tracking 6,056 accounts. As the purpose of Twitter is obviously to tweet, it is important to mention its most prolific HEI Twitter account—George Washington University—at almost 58 tweets per day. Indiana University – Bloomington is in the eighth spot with 38.1 tweets per day (UniversitiesandColleges.org, 2011). Starting in 2005, many SNSs have been launched in the US and abroad, including Askbook, BEBO (Blog Early, Blog Often), Digg, Dropbox, Flickr, Friendfeed, Instagram, Google+, Orkut, Pinterest, Reddit, Renren, Tumblr, Quora, Vevo, and VKontakte. Statistical analysis of members’ activities reveals that none of these listed sites enjoys the same size membership as the six sites discussed earlier, and their presence on the HEI websites is equally low (Curtis, 2013; Dugan, 2012). For the purpose of this study, this researcher sought to focus on the previously mentioned six SNSs because of their high market penetration rate and reportedly strong connections to HEIs.

¹ This number changes daily because followers can elect to unfollow the account and new followers can join.

Part V. SNSs: Opportunities for Students' Recruitment: History of SNS Use for Admission Practices

In 2007 and 2008, two nationwide comprehensive studies sought to analyze how college admission officers used SNSs in their recruitment of undergraduate domestic and international students. Responses of 453 and 536 admission offices, respectively, from all four-year accredited HEIs in the US were collected and analyzed (Barnes & Mattson, 2010). The 2007 study revealed that HEIs are surpassing Fortune 500 and Inc. 500 companies in “their use of social media to communicate with their customers (i.e., students)” (Barnes & Mattson, 2010, p. 2). The 2008 study confirmed this finding and also emphasized the growing familiarity of admission officers with social networking: 63% of admission officers were very familiar with social media in 2008, an 8% increase from 55% one year prior. Also, 47% of these professionals in 2008 were familiar with specific forms of social networking, such as videoblogging, blogging, podcasting, message boards, and Wiki, an increase from 26% in 2007. Additionally, in 2008, 85% of survey respondents admitted to using at least one form of social media, a 24% increase from 2007. Barnes and Mattson (2010) insisted that

the adoption of social media by admission departments is being driven by familiarity and their recognition of the increasingly important role of social media in today's world... Eighty-nine percent of admissions departments feel that social media is at least “somewhat important” to their future strategy. (p. 4)

In July 2008, Rachel Reuben (2008) sent surveys to higher education professionals who subscribed to the uweb, HighEdWeb, and SUNY CUADnet listservs regarding “their university's use of social media” (p. 4). Without duplicate answers,

“there were 148 unique schools responding to the survey” (Reuben, 2008, p. 4). Of those who responded, 53.79% reported having a Facebook page and 21.9% a MySpace page, and “just over half have an official presence on YouTube and nearly 60% have some forms of blogs on their sites” (Reuben, 2008, p. 5). Most of the respondents reported that they use social media for marketing, “for communicating with current students, to reach out to alumni, and for recruitment” (Reuben, 2008, p. 6).

During its collegiate conversation entitled “Using Social Media for International Recruitment” that was conducted “live” on May 19, 2011, the National Association of International Educators (NAFSA) identified that 76% of the web event participants “use one or more social media platforms to reach international students” (NAFSA, 2011, p. 1) and 56% of participants confirmed that their use of social media platform is “part of a larger strategic plan for international student outreach” (NAFSA, 2011, p. 4).

SNSs, college recruitment, and return on investment (ROI). Cheryl Darrup-Boychuck (2009), owner and chief international education officer for USJournal, attempted to measure the ROI of different approaches to student recruitment, including the use of SNSs. In particular, she compared “inbound marketing,” which included marketing through SNSs, to traditional or “outbound marketing.” She determined that traditional marketing, which includes attending college fairs, developing and disseminating paperless and paper promotional materials, and similar efforts, is less effective than marketing through SNSs. First, “outbound marketing” aims at too wide of an audience. Second, it is subjected to various obstructions, such as spam filters that block mass emails and “tools like RSS that makes print and display advertising less effective” (Darrup-Boychuck, 2009, slide 59). In contrast, SNSs have no obstructions

and are more focused on specific groups, which, in Darrup-Buychuck's estimate, leads to a 61% decrease in cost per student lead (Darrup-Boychuck, 2009). Inbound marketing also has no cost differentiation between targeting domestic and international students, while costs of traditional forms of recruitment differ substantially. For instance, using data from Baxton and Foley (2009), Darrup-Boychuck demonstrated that it costs approximately \$200 to recruit one in-state student, \$500 to recruit one out-of-state student, and \$1,000 to recruit one international student, not including staff salaries. Meanwhile, the cost of online promoting, using "pay-per-click" or mobile marketing, is \$119.50 per any enrolled student, regardless of the student's county of origin. Even more exciting is the fact that the cost of recruiting via SNSs such as Facebook or Twitter is nothing (Darrup-Boychuck, 2009). Additionally, by using SNSs universities can "go green" and save thousands of dollars in the recurring costs of printing and mailing educational and promotional materials (Hayes, Ruschman, & Walker, 2009).

These are encouraging numbers, but, as of today, this type of recruitment is viewed as more of a complementary method and not a substitute for traditional methods and strategies. Indeed, while the "wired generation" is the major target of recruitment efforts, the decision-making power still largely belongs to parents; therefore, they are consumers of the variety of other forms of recruitment and enrollment.

SNS opportunities and benefits.

SNSs and monitoring of students' activities.

Trackability of intents. There is a great amount of "trackability" of students' intent and interest that is offered by the use of SNSs. First of all, admission officers can modify their marketing efforts based on the almost immediate feedback from their

targeted audience, which is technologically savvy, demanding, and eager to share its opinion (ISSUU, 2010). For example, Golder, Wilkinson, and Huberman (2007) reported that they were able to analyze 362 million messages of 4 million Facebook users for insights into messaging information and “friending” activity—an immeasurably useful input for understanding and attracting potential students. In addition, based on researching Orkut—the most popular SNS in South America—“Spertus, Sahami, and Buyukkokten (2005) identified topology of users through their membership in certain communities; they suggested that sites can use this to recommend additional communities of interest to users” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 221), which can increase number of followers and fuel general interest in the specific university. Therefore, “trackability” can result in targeted recommendations which can create an effect of an “early intervention.”

Early interventions. The idea of “early interventions” is fueled by Mazzarol and Soutar’s (2002) assertion that

the decision process through which the international student moves when selecting a final study destination appears to involve at least three distinct stages.

In stage one, the student must decide to study internationally... Once the decision to study abroad has been made, the next decision is the selection of a host country. (p. 85)

First, the use of SNSs, including “trackability” of intentions, allows for identifying “stage one” students, those who have already made a decision to study internationally. The enrollment officers then can help prospects in the selected country of interest by channeling them to specific HEIs through the “communities of interests” on

Facebook or through blogs. They can also approach potential students directly.

Eventually, admission officers' efforts can become part of the "pull" factors influencing students' decision.

Second, "trackability" allows for metrics collection. For example, Xavier University's social network site "Road to Xavier" helped to collect metrics of freshmen matriculation behavior, which resulted in identifying statistically significant relationships between those who logged into "Road to Xavier" and the likelihood of them attending the institution. The number of logins positively correlated with the enrollment into the university; the four-year longitudinal study also demonstrated the constant increase in number of logins per future admit and those who actually enrolled into the university. (Hayes et al., 2009).

These relationships allow the university to focus its resources on students who demonstrate the greatest propensity to attend. The university also discovers that if the students do not initially log on to the site within the two or three weeks of invitation, they are less likely to enroll (Hayes et al., 2009, p.120).

Twitter offers a tracking tool called TweetStats.com (2011) which provides a powerful opportunity for obtaining the number of not just tweets, but topical tweets per year, a month, or even per day, including those related to recruitment issues. For instance, TweetStats.com can identify the months when admission questions are at their peak, and the admission officers can allocate more time to Twitter pages, during that time. The tool also offers the option to view a percentage of replies per specific tweet, as well as the number of topical tweet followers (TweetStats, 2011). This information also makes enrollment efforts more targeted and specific.

Tracking tools like Google and Yahoo Alert permit universities to follow students' activities. Among other things, these tools offer data regarding academic units reviewed by potential students, students' common areas of concerns, geographic locations, hobbies, interests, and even parental involvement (google.com/alert). Instant awareness of what is being said and viewed allows HEI admission officers to quickly and strategically react to issues, challenges, and opportunities.

SNSs and recruitment personification. The almost unlimited ability of SNSs to track users' activities and interests makes enrollment efforts more focused. First of all, it engages potential students and keeps them involved. For instance, if a potential student's profile indicates that she lives in India, is interested in ice-skating and French movies, and wants to attend university in the Midwest, Facebook gives her the ability to instantly connect with dozens or hundreds of other individuals similar to her. If one of these friends directs her to the university where he or she studies, it might make this university more attractive; after all, these two individuals share interests and culture.

According to Collegerecruiting.com (2009), "over half of all colleges currently run student blogs... Pick a couple of enthusiastic, innovative students and ask them to write about their life at college... You'll be amazed by the impact they have" (p. 2) and by the strong "pull" effect of these efforts. Admission offices are part of this trend, as they engage current international students in creating their own blogs and targeting them to the interests of student-prospects from their home countries. Additionally, international student blog writers can create groups on their regional SNS, such as, for example, Orkut in South America, or VKontakte in Russia; this activity will make their posts even more targeted and specific.

The effect of personalization associated with SNSs also assists international students in selecting a host country, which is influenced by the overall availability of information about the potential destination country and the ease with which students could obtain the information, and the level of referrals or personal recommendations that the study destination receives from parents, relatives, friends and other “gatekeepers.” (Mazzarol & Sauter, 2002, p. 85)

Social network “friends” can be the sources of these referrals and recommendations. They can answer prospects’ specific questions, describe the HEI’s policies, help in making connections, and, overall, make the conversation personal and targeted to a prospective student’s specific needs.

SNS timeliness. The critical timeliness of SNSs also allows for posting current updates, various words of advice, and specific departmental and individual students’ stories. It can provide immediate responses to questions and concerns, offer encouragement, and celebrate successes. In general, SNSs are a connection tool, similar to a live, face-to face conversation. This unique timelessness of SNSs is even reflected in some of the SNS names. For example, Russia’s most popular SNS is VKontakte, which literally means “staying in contact.”

Part VI. SNSs: Concerns and Barriers

Loss of control over content. One of the biggest limitations of SNSs is the loss of control over content; anyone can create an “official” college account on Facebook, Twitter, and other SNSs and share any type of information with the users (Reuben, 2008). For instance, Mascari and Webber (2008) warned that students can use Facebook pages

of their college of interest “to get any number of college application essays designed to match your personality and grades... To get the inside scoop on partying, drugs, sex, and cheating” (p. 4).

Similar concerns are connected with the use of “blogs” and comments placed on SNSs. Negativity in bloggers’ commentaries can easily and instantly change readers’ opinions about anything (Solis, 2008), including their perception of any HEIs. Reuben (2008) stated, “If your university had a Facebook page, a MySpace page, or uses any of these other tools, there are forums for comments that have the chance of collecting negative remarks and feedback” (p. 7). During the NAFSA-run live conversation with college recruiters, Marty Bennett (2011) made similar comments and emphasized that “in social media, you no longer control the message—it’s about joining the conversation” (p. 2).

Personnel’s time commitment. Time constraints represent another barrier in using SNSs. For some admission officers, the need to use SNSs on the same level as potential enrollees involves a “giant leap into the techno world of students” (Mascari & Webber, 2008, p. 3). The current or upcoming students are “wired” to function in the world of social networks. They grew up in a different technological environment and are accustomed to diverse forms of communication and knowledge acquisition. For instance, for many, e-mail is the primary source of connecting with peers and colleagues; however, Kirkpatrick (2009; as cited in Hayes et al., 2009) insisted that “for young people, e-mail is how you communicate with elders in formal situation while social networks and SMS are the preferred methods of communication among peers (p. 110). In contrast, the majority of college admission officers and counselors belong to the generations of

“digital immigrants” and “early adapters,” who, similar to immigrants learning new languages, have had to learn new technologies and then integrate these technological advances into their lives to avoid professional “extinction” (Mascari & Webber, 2008; Prensky, 2001).

Meanwhile, these enrollment professionals are charged with a myriad of different duties, which create barriers in their finding time to “rewire” themselves and become fluent in these “new languages.” The time constraints become obstacles for fluency in SNS operations. Additionally, enrollment offices of many universities, but particularly in the smaller liberal arts colleges, are often one-person operations. Investing time into learning new technologies and cultures, maintaining SNS content, responding to messages, and following tweets and blogs, in addition to these individuals’ regular duties, might, and usually are, time prohibitive.

Admission officers’ competency in SNS content. SNSs can be very effective in following up with and engaging students who have already learned about a particular school. Unfortunately, they are not as effectual in creating an initial interest. Noel-Levitz’s (2009) survey of 1,000 college-bound students demonstrated that before students begin learning about a college and, hopefully, falling in love with it, they first have to find it. Their search for colleges starts with Google, MyCollegeOptions, or College Board options that bring them to college websites. The website navigation provides prospective students with the variety of options; SNSs and websites are among many of these links. This “secondary nature” is one of the primary weaknesses of SNSs. However, 70% of survey participants expect the presence of SNSs on a college’s website.

They value these sites mostly based on their content, accuracy, and simplicity of navigation (Noel-Levitz, 2009).

Enrollment office personnel recognize the importance of SNSs for recruitment and possess a general understanding of the content of messages and topics that would attract prospective domestic students (Noel-Levitz, 2009). The key word here is “general,” because they still need to possess better insight about younger generations’ interests and cultures. As for reaching out to foreign students, many of the admission officers report not having enough competencies to develop content that would be relevant to international students’ needs and would attract foreign candidates to their colleges’ Facebook pages (Missy, 2011; Thostenson, 2011). Learning about and adapting to new cultures can help with creating SNS content and enhancing their college’s attractiveness, but these efforts require additional, complex, and multifaceted training and, again, time commitment.

Privacy of information and limitations in available research. Presently, there is no established policy that regulates content of SNS messages, the follow-up use of this information, and protection of users’ confidentiality. Meanwhile, Hayes et al. (2009) advised that “once you lose the public trust due to poor security measures, it will be very difficult to regain” (p. 121). Interestingly, SNS users in countries with slower Internet penetration rates (IPRs) are less concerned with the possibility of their privacy violation. According to research presented in *The Economist* (2011), “Europeans are increasingly concerned about online data privacy” (para. 1), but Eastern Europeans from countries marked by the slower IPRs, such as Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, and Cyprus, have a high

trust in SNSs, while Western Europeans worry about potential misuse of their personal data.

Another significant barrier is connected with the skyrocketing evolution of SNSs and the breathtaking speed of their development, which surpasses the corresponding research. Currently, the majority of information is available through secondary sources, such as blogs, Internet discussions, forums, and various sites, but more primary contemporary scientific articles are needed. Research literature that is more than a year old is in danger of sounding obsolete.

Summary: Parts IV, V, and VI

In Parts IV, V, and VI, I discussed the history and evolution of the major SNSs. I also reviewed unique features of each specific SNS and how these features are being used or can be used for the purpose of college recruitment and admission. Special attention was given to SNS benefits and challenges that their use presents to HEI personnel. In the following chapters, I will discuss factors that influence SNS proliferations into the various world regions and the impact these proliferations have on the number of international students on U.S. campuses in general, particularly students from Russia.

Part VII. Prevalence of SNSs in World Regions

Internet penetration rate (IPR). Facebook, Twitter, and other SNSs occupy a rather permanent place in the lives of contemporary U.S. students. Many college attendees, as well as people of more mature generations, cannot imagine their existence without checking their SNS pages for messages, pictures, and updates. These activities are as much a part of our lives as the use of Internet, which essentially allows for the utilization and the very existence of SNSs. However, Internet availability (something

that people who live in North America take for granted) is not a readily available commodity in many parts of the world. Meanwhile, the effectiveness of SNSs for the recruitment and enrollment of international students is heavily connected to a country's Internet penetration rate (IPR). Therefore, enrollment managers might find it necessary to assess potential international students' ability to access Internet and, as a result, SNSs.

Internet World Stats (IWS) records up-to-date internet usage, population statistics, and Internet market research data for 233 countries and world regions (Internetworldstats.com, 2011). According to IWS (2011), IPR per region, based on the population statistics, is the highest in North America with 78.3% penetration, followed by Oceania/Australia (60.1%), Europe (58.3%), Latin America (36.2%), Middle East (31.7%), Asia (23.8%), and Africa (11.4%). Although IPR in Asia is inferior to North America or Europe, the number of actual Internet users there is 922.3 million, or 44% of all world users. Europe represents 476.2 million Internet users, or 22.7% of all world users; North America is at 272.1 million, or 13% of all world users; and Latin America is at 215.9 million, or 10.3% of all world users. All other regions collectively represent 10% of all world Internet users.

The data suggest that the regions with higher IPRs are more likely to have a higher usage of SNSs. Indeed, 56% of Internet users in North America are also Facebook users, followed by 54.4% of Internet users in Oceania/Australia; however, this is followed by the Caribbean, with 39% of Internet users also being Facebook users; Latin America, with 35% of Internet users also being Facebook users; Europe, with 34.1% of Internet users being Facebook users; followed by the Middle East (18.5%), Africa (15.9%), and Asia (11.3%). However, in terms of the number of people, Europe has the

highest number of Facebook users, 162.1 million people. In descending order, there are 149.1 million Facebook users in North America, 93.6 million in Asia, 68.2 million in Latin America, 17.6 million in Africa, 11.7 million in the Middle East, 11.6 million in Oceania/Australia, and 3.9 million in the Caribbean (InternetWorldStats.com, 2011).

SNSs and growth of Internet penetration rates (IPRs). The knowledge of a country's IPR is beneficial for informing HEI recruitment efforts. However, for the purpose of enrollment management strategic planning, it is also important to analyze IPR growth. This growth places Africa ahead of other regions, with an average IPR growth of 2,527.00%, followed by the Middle East, with an average IPR growth of 1,987.00 %, and Latin America, with an average IPR growth of 1,037.00%. This trend emphasizes these regions' increasing importance as consumers of Internet, including SNSs. HEIs that would manage to establish their SNSs in the regions and specific countries with the highest IPR growth rates should be able to use the familiarity effect in the near future. This strategy could lead to attracting more international students in the future (InternetWorldStats.com, 2011).

SNSs and diversity of IPR within different regions.

Asia. The diversity in IPRs within regions is another factor associated with the success of using SNSs for the enrollment management of international students. For instance, while large numbers of Internet and Facebook users make the Asian market exceedingly attractive for HEIs online and SPS recruitment, based on the number of users, only four out of 35 Asian countries—China (384 million users), Japan (96 million users), India (81 million users), and South Korea (37.5 million users)—are the leading Internet consumers; the remaining 31 listed countries report having approximately 104

million users collectively. Furthermore, India and China net an additional 10 million Internet subscribers monthly (Budde.com, 2010). Perhaps these statistics can explain why, according to an Open Door (2010) report, students from China, India, and South Korea represent the largest group of international students in the U.S. HEIs; Taiwan and Japan hold the fifth and sixth places.

South America. The situation is similar in South America: 39.4%, or 72 million, Internet users in Latin America live in Brazil, followed by Mexico (15.1%, or 27.6 million), Columbia (11.4%, or 22.8 million), and Argentina (10.9%, or 20 million). The remaining 16 countries collectively have 22.7%, or 40.3 million, Internet users. Brazil is also leading this region in IPR growth, while Open Door (2010) identified a 6% increase in students' enrollment into U.S. HEIs from this country (IWS, 2011).

Middle East. The Middle East is equally uneven. Iran has 52.5%, or 33.2 million, of all Internet users in this region, followed by Saudi Arabia (15.5%, or 9.8 million) and Israel (8.3%, or 5.2 million). In 2010, Saudi Arabia demonstrated the largest increase in international students enrolled in U.S. HEIs. The remaining 13 countries have 23.7% of Internet penetration, or 15 million users. In the last decade, Iran exhibited a remarkable rate of IPR growth (13,180%), as did Syria (13,016%), while IPRs in the countries of Bahrain (88%), United Arab Emirates (75.9%), and Israel (71.6%) are among the highest in the world (IWS, 2011).

Africa. Out of the 57 countries on the African continent, 46 countries have less than 1% IPR. Nigeria has 37.1% IPR, or 43.9 million users, followed by Egypt (17%, or 20.1 million), Morocco (11.1%, or 13.2 million), and South Africa (5.7%, or 6.8 million). In the last decade, Africa's Internet and Broadband sector has been rather insignificant,

but accelerated tremendously in 2009 and 2010 due to improvements in infrastructure, the arrival of wireless access technologies, and a 90% decrease in the Internet cost. Broadband is rapidly replacing dial-up, which is detrimental to the speed of connections (Budde.com, 2011). Overall, the majority of world regions, mostly developing countries, are displaying an energetic expansion of broadband at a decreasing cost due to marketing competition.

This is an important development, because level of access to Internet-based SNSs is highly influenced by broadband availability. For example, at the minimum broadband speed of 256 Kbps, downloading a short (20 MB) college promoting a video clip from YouTube will take 10 min 25 s in most African countries, compared to 2 s at a connection speed of 100 Mbps in Taiwan or Hong Kong (InternationalWorldStats, 2011; “The World in 2010,” 2010). Also, there remain significant differences among countries when it comes to broadband affordability: “In 2009, an entry-level fixed (wired) broadband connection cost on average \$190 per month in developing countries, compare only to \$28 per month in developed countries” (“The World in 2010,” 2010, p. 7).

Income, IPR, and the Use of SNSs

By analyzing the top 25 countries that send students to the US, it became apparent that 14 countries belong to the “high income” group, which is identified by the World Bank (2011) as countries with over \$11,455 per capita income per year. There are five countries in the “upper middle income” category, with annual per capita income ranging from \$3,706 to \$11,455 (World Bank, 2011). The remaining six sending countries—India, Nepal, Nigeria, Vietnam, Kenya, and Pakistan—are part of the “low income”

group of countries, with an annual per capita income ranging from \$936 to \$3,705 (World Bank, 2011).

The IPR in low income countries is lower, but the growth of Internet users in these countries is 10 and sometimes 100 times higher than in countries with higher income. The number of SNS users in lower income countries has also grown and is now in the millions (Table 1). It is perhaps worth noticing that during the last five years, the enrollment of students from four of the six lower income countries—India, Nepal, Nigeria and Vietnam—has been consistently increasing (Open Door, 2010), which is reflected in Table 2 and Graph 1.

These trends—decrease in the cost of broadband, growth in IPR regardless of the country’s per capita income, and growth in SNS membership and engagement—suggest that there are some connections between the rate of SNS use and the increase in international student enrollment in HEIs in the US. However, more research is required to analyze this observation.

Use of Social Network Sites in Russia

Overview. In 2013, Russia was ranked fifth among the top five social networking countries. There are estimated to be between 56.9 and 57.6 million SNS users, or approximately 41.9% of the entire population (comScore, 2013; European Travel Commission, Social Networking, and UGC, 2013). The number was projected to grow to 62.2 million users, or close to 45% of the population, by 2014 (Synthesio, 2013). The Public Opinion Foundation in Russia reported that because the country’s household broadband penetration is flat, the growth in SNS usage can be attributed to the increase in mobile Internet use. Indeed, more than half of the SNS users in Russia visit SNSs on

their mobile devices, and 68% of these users are between 18 to 29 years old (NewMedia TravelWatch, Russia, 2013).

The level of engagement among users of SNS in Russia is high. In 2010, Russians ranked third (after Israeli and Argentineans) in average number of hours each user spends on SNSs, totaling 9.8 hr per month. In 2011, this number increased to 10.4 hr per month (comScore, 2011). According to comScore, an Internet technology company that provides analytics for a digital world, among Internet users in Russia, 34.5 million people use at least one SNS per month (comScore, 2013). Users of SNSs in Russia are also more likely to spend from 30 to 60 min a day using different SNSs, while users in other European countries typically spend less than 30 min using different SNSs (GlobalWebIndex, 2013).

Social network sites' penetration.

VKontakte.ru. The most popular SNSs in Russia are VKontakte (“In Contact” or “In Touch”), Odnoklassniki (“Classmates”), YouTube, and Facebook. The most popular SNS, VKontakte, is estimated to have approximately 49.2 million registered users, but some estimate this number at 57.8 million users. Around 29.1 million people use it monthly and close to 23 million use it daily; an average daily visit is 35 min, but total number of minutes per member per month is estimated at 307. Individuals aged 18 to 24 years old comprise 17% of VKontakte users, 25 to 34 years old represent 39%, and 35 to 44 years old represent 20%; 51% of users are female and 49% are male (comScore, 2013; Редкая марка, 2012).

Odnoklassniki.ru. The second most popular SNS, Odnoklassniki.ru, is estimated to have 37.7 million registered users. Around 25.3 million people use it monthly and

close to 19.5 million people use it daily; an average visit is 24 min per day, but total number of minutes per member per month is estimated at 368. Individuals aged 18 to 24 years old comprise 16% of Odnoklassniki users, 25 to 34 years old represent 25% of users, and 35 to 44 years old represent 33% of users. The majority of Odnoklassniki users tend to be 30 years old and above; 53% of users are female and 47% are male (comScore, 2013; Редкая марка, 2012).

Facebook. Some sources estimate Facebook to be the third most popular SNS in Russian, while others place it fourth after YouTube. The reported number of registered users is approximately 25.4 million people. Around 15.5 million people use Facebook monthly and around 2.3 million people use it daily. Average time on Facebook per user per day is estimated at 29.4 min, but total number of minutes per member per month is estimated at 122 (comScore, 2013; Редкая марка, 2012; TNS Web Index, 2013). In the second-fourth quarters of 2012, Facebook in Russia managed to grow by 33% (Oshkalo, 2013). Individuals aged 18 to 24 years old comprise 16% of Facebook users, 25 to 34 years old represent 39% of users, and 35 to 44 years old represent 21% of users. Among Facebook users in Russia, 42% are female and 58% are male.

YouTube. Because registration is not a requirement for using YouTube, the average number of unique users is estimated at 32 million. Around 24.3 million people use YouTube monthly and close to 4.4 million people use it daily; an average visit is 10 min per day. Individuals aged 18 to 24 comprise 16% of YouTube users, 25 to 34 years old represent 39% of users, and 35 to 44 years old represent 20% of users. Approximately 46% of YouTube users are female and 54% of users are male (comScore, 2013; Редкая марка, 2012).

Chapter Summary

Because the phenomenon of social networking is so new, research in the area is still limited, including research pertaining to the use of SNSs in the college admissions process. Meanwhile, the impact of SNSs on students' college choice is apparent. Among unique features that could assist students' choice are SNSs' unprecedented trackability of perspective students' interests, immediacy in responses to concerns and questions, targeted personalization of marketing efforts, and low institutional financial obligations. Growth in IPR and strong SNS membership in countries outside of the US suggest an opportunity for geographic expansion of marketing strategies. However, privacy and control over the content are areas of concern. In order to optimize the use of SNSs, fluency in the site's features and content is required, as well as knowledge about the SNS behavior of the targeted population groups.

This study aimed to respond to this need. The focus of the study was the college choice activities and social networking behavior of international transfer students. Specifically, it explored how freshmen, sophomores, and juniors at the Russian State University of Humanities in Moscow, who are planning to transfer to HEIs abroad to continue their higher education, use SNSs to search information and make decisions about which specific HEIs to attend in the country of their choosing.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Choosing a higher education institution (HEI) is a complex process, but for international students, this decision-making process is even more difficult. Lee et al. (2010) stated:

Enrolling in an institution outside one's home country, often removed from family and other support networks, and learning a new culture, all based on limited information in making this decision can pose unanticipated obstacles upon enrollment and, in some cases, decisions to remain in the home country. (p. 551)

Personnel of HEI enrollment offices are cognizant of these limitations and recognize the importance of information and communication. The availability of SNSs allows for immediate and direct communication with students, which could help to better inform their decision-making process. In order to better connect with students and facilitate their decision-making process, personnel of HEI enrollment offices need to gain insight into students' trends of using SNSs and master competencies in developing culturally relevant content (Missy, 2011; Thostenson, 2011). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the "social networking behavior" of international students who are planning to transfer to a postsecondary institution in the United States. In particular, the study aimed to learn about international students' use of SNSs in their decision-making process after making the decision to study abroad. This chapter outlines the research method selected for this study. It also describes the preliminary pilot study, including lessons learned and changes implemented. The chapter then discusses data collection procedure, recruitment protocol, interview protocol, plans for data analysis, quality assurance measures, ethical issues, researcher's background, and study limitations.

Qualitative research. A qualitative research approach was selected for this study. Qualitative research is often defined as a quest for answering “how” and “why” questions in order to understand how people experience and interpret the world (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, while describing qualitative research, scientists also emphasize the natural setting in which it is conducted. Indeed, individuals’ opinions and views are formed and influenced by social, cultural, and historic circumstances; therefore, working with respondents in their natural setting could assist in gaining a more accurate understanding of respondents’ views and thoughts (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2002) also recommended relying on Rossman and Rallis (1998) in discussing qualitative research, because these scientists “capture both traditional perspectives and the newer advocacy, participatory, and self-reflective perspectives of qualitative inquiry” (Creswell, 2002, p. 181). According to Rossman and Rallis, qualitative study assists in gaining a better understanding of human behavior, opinions, and experiences, and in exploring and investigating lesser known situations, circumstances or phenomena. In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of human behavior, qualitative research employs specific data collection methods, including observations, focus groups, case studies, and interviews—activities which allow for a narrative, descriptive account of the respondents’ experiences (Parkinson & Drislane, 2011).

Nkwi, Nyamongo, and Ryan (2001) offered a simpler and more functional definition of qualitative research. According to their approach, “qualitative research involves any research that uses data that do not employ ordinal values” (Nkwi et al., 2001, p. 1). As such, qualitative research avoids the dichotomy present in quantitative research while being less constrictive. It also expands the research boundaries of

qualitative research, including various forms of data sources, data collection, and approaches to analysis, and involves the use of text, images, opinions, and sounds.

According to the discussion above, this study fits the criteria of a qualitative research. This approach also allows for a deeper and a more multidimensional understanding of the respondents' behavior and views through asking open-ended "why" and "how" questions, questioning respondents in their natural setting, and probing into respondents' responses. This emergent rather than prefigured process permits the researcher to obtain more details and explanations of respondents' views, thoughts, and experiences in order to gain unbiased information which was not anticipated by the researcher (Creswell, 2002).

Research Design

This qualitative study employs the analytical message from grounded theory approach as its research design. A grounded theory study is a type of qualitative study that depicts and describes how people experience a certain phenomenon (Patton, 2002). It focuses on the perspectives of individuals and provides them with opportunities to "articulate their thoughts about issues they consider important, allowing them to reflect on these issues and concerns to gain understanding and acquire new insights" (Glaser, 1998, p. 32). I was interested in exploring how the freshmen, sophomore, and juniors who are planning to transfer from the Russia State University of Humanities (RSUH) in Moscow to HEIs abroad use social network sites (SNSs) in making a decision about which HEIs abroad to attend. These students shared one experience: They reported using SNSs, among other things, to obtain information about HEIs abroad in their decision-making process about which HEI abroad to attend. My goal was to learn about the

essence of that experience and how these students used SNSs to obtain information about HEIs abroad.

Overall, the goal of this grounded theory study was to explore how freshmen and sophomore transfer students from RSUH in Moscow use social network sites (SNSs) in their decision making about what HEI abroad to attend. To meet this goal, the study aimed to answer the following supportive questions:

1. What SNSs did students of Russia State University for Humanities (RSUH) use for their college choice activities?
2. What type of information on SNSs is being used by RSUH students for their college choice activities?
3. Were there any connections between type of information available on SNSs and RSUH students' choice of HEI in the US?

Pilot Study

Data collection.

Recruitment process. A pilot study for this research was conducted in April 2013 during my two-week Fulbright Specialist visit to RSUH. The pilot consisted of focus group activities with RSUH students who self-identified as planning to transfer to HEIs abroad and who were using SNSs for this purpose.

One of my duties as Fulbright Specialist was to deliver a mini-course entitled, “How the Advancements in Medical Technologies and Pharmaceutical Industry Influenced the Development of New Ethical Problems in Health Care.” The mini-course included four 90-min lectures (Tuesday, Friday) and was part of the General Psychology course—a core curricular requirement for undergraduate students from several

departments, including Psychology and English/Russian Philology. The audience for the mini-course was selected by the Deputy Director of the RSUH Russian-American Center, Professor Marina Rafailovna Kaul, although the lectures were open to the entire university community and announcements were posted throughout the campus. All lectures were conducted in English. The data source consisted of focus groups activities that took place immediately after each lecture of the mini-course.

Professor Kaul and I met during the International Conference (Russia – USA. Relations Reloaded) that took place at RSUH, in Moscow, in early 2013. She was interested in enriching her students' curriculum as it related to American Studies. She thought that it would be beneficial for her students to have a guest lecturer who could conduct presentations from a perspective of a Russian American. Dr. Kaul later requested me as a Fulbright Scholar from the Fulbright Scholar roster for a multiple visit project to conduct several miniseries of lectures related to the system healthcare ethics and healthcare delivery in the United States.

At the beginning of the first lecture, Dr. Kaul conveyed the message that she and I discussed and designed together:

Our lecturer is doing research about how foreign students use social network sites for finding information about universities abroad. If any of you are planning to transfer to HEIs in the United States or other countries abroad and are using SNSs for these purposes, if have time after class, and are willing to share your experiences, she would appreciate you staying for a focus group discussion. The discussion will be in English.

Careful consideration was given to the wording of the message to make it sound less like a request and more like an invitation to share their time and experiences. At the end of each lecture, I repeated this announcement.

Each lecture was attended by 46 to 48 students and 11 students self-selected for focus group participation. There were four lectures and three focus groups: The first group consisted of six students, the second group was attended by one student, and the third group was attended by four students. No students showed up after the fourth lecture. Meeting with one student took 25 min. The other two focus group activities lasted 40-45 min.

Focus group activities. The focus group activities were loosely structured. First, I explained my research. Second, I gave an overview of the “push-pull” concept, with an emphasis on pull factors. Third, using Patton’s framework related to participant behavior and experiences, I asked students to share their experiences of using SNSs for the purpose of obtaining more information about HEIs abroad. Respondents were also encouraged to ask questions. During occasional disagreements, or in cases when a participant dominated the discussion or repeated the same statement over and over, I interfered and probed by asking open-ended questions, such as “Why?” “Can you be more specific?” or “Can you tell us more?”

All focus group activities were conducted in English. Demographic information was collected at the beginning. Identifiers, such as participants’ names in Russian, were used for coding purposes. Copious notes were taken during each focus group activity and were transcribed immediately after. The activities were also recorded by iPod, but unfortunately only fragments of conversations were actually audible.

Demographics. The first group consisted of three sophomore females majoring in general psychology, one freshman female majoring in accounting, and two sophomore males majoring in clinical psychology. The second group could also be called an individual interview, as only one individual, a female master's student majoring in English philology, participated. Although the lectures were intended for undergraduate students only, the public announcement could have attracted graduate students and students of different majors, which probably explains attendance by a master's student. The third group consisted of four students—three senior females majoring in Russian philology and one second-year prelaw male student.

Analysis and Results

Analysis. The focus group activities were transcribed immediately after the activity took place. Participants were coded. Each focus group transcription was read and the text was divided into themes. Each theme was coded; the content within these themes was sorted, divided, and coded based on the topic-related subgroups. In addition to focusing on individual responses, particular attention was given to interactions among individuals within the focus group. Consistent with a grounded theory approach, these interactions were also noted, coded, and interpreted. Participants' responses can be loosely divided into three themes: (a) how to find good institutional SNSs, (b) what SNSs were used and why, and (c) what type of information respondents were searching for.

Results.

Finding institutional social network sites. Institutional social network sites were found through three channels. Most common was a Google search that led to the universities' main pages. From there, participants reported accessing institutions'

Facebook, Twitter, and other social media accounts. The second most common channel was friends' recommendations and advice on how and where to find institutional SNSs. The third most common channel consisted of accessing the Facebook, Google+, and Twitter pages of faculty, staff, students, and student organizations.

SNSs used. Respondents reported searching (in order of popularity) Facebook, VKontakte, Twitter, Instagram, Google+, and some individual blogs. Facebook and Twitter were described as more informative, while VKontakte was described as better suited for the exchange of pictures and small talk with friends. Instagram was reported to offer the best snapshots of students' nonacademic activities—information that participants identified as valuable. Google+, while used by many, was identified as not as useful and difficult to navigate.

The number of “likes” and “friends” on an institution’s Facebook page indicated the institution’s popularity and worthiness. Institutional Facebook pages were also searched for specific groups, particularly Russian language groups, regardless of the groups’ participants’ countries of origin. Reasons for this included: absence of language barriers, like-minded interests, and a better chance of receiving answers tailored to questions. Page content was noted last; each content item was also reviewed for number of likes and comments.

Twitter pages of HEIs were evaluated on their ratio of “followers”² to “following”³. The accounts were reported to be followed because of an HEI’s name

² A person who subscribes to (i.e. follows) the Twitter account of another person to receive updates of this person’s tweets.

³ On the Twitter website, “following” someone means you will see their tweets (Twitter updates) in your personal timeline. Twitter lets you see who you follow and also who is following you. Followers are people who receive other people's Twitter updates (http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/T/Twitter_following.html).

recognition and unfollowed due to a high volume of posts and post content identified as “low value added.” The first few posts upon following the account determined the “following” decision.

Type of information respondents were trying to find. Respondents reported searching SNS posts, links, pictures, comments, and opinions for information related to price, such as the cost of apartments or dorms, food, concert tickets, drinks, gas, cars, clothes, and airfare, as well as the process of obtaining financial aid. Almost equally popular were searches related to prestige, including career options, employability after graduation, Internship placements, caliber of students and faculty, ranking, and name recognition. Geography (place) was mentioned only once by a graduate student. Promotion was valued, particularly posts and opinions of other Russian language students related to admission processes, transferability of credits, treatment of foreigners, level of English required, quality of support services, rigor of English as a Second Language classes, and social life.

Limitations and lessons learned.

Population. Responses of undergraduate and graduate students differed significantly, as did responses of freshmen and sophomores as compared to responses of upperclassmen. Responses of participants who identified as being in the process of considering transferring to an HEI abroad, who took the TOEFL, and who attended at least one information session related to transferring abroad differed from responses of those who just recently made the decision to transfer abroad. Purposeful sampling of each of these population groups would result in richer and more specific content, which is an important consideration in qualitative research.

Participants with a better command of English tended to dominate the discussion, while participants with less advanced English language knowledge were somewhat limited in their participation. This situation could be addressed by collecting information through individual interviews, which would allow participants to converse at their own pace. Another option would be to conduct interviews in Russian; however, this could encourage the participation of nontransferring students. The third option would be to focus on students who have already taken an English proficiency test, such as the TOEFL, and who obtained a score within the range for acceptance to HEIs abroad.

Scheduling and technology. All focus group announcements were made on the same day as when the focus group activities took place. Participants mentioned that short notice prevented some of their peers from participating. Announcements and scheduling made in advance would have allowed participants to adjust their plans, possibly leading to a higher participation rate. As only one student attended the focus group on Friday, and no one chose to participate in the focus group held on the second Friday, no activities should be planned for Friday.

Technology should be tested. Additional manual note-taking by a third person would assist in capturing participants' narratives. Having WiFi access in an interview room could assist in visualizing participants' statements and observations regarding SNS use.

Current Study

Data collection.

Location. The participants recruited for this study were students from the Russian State University for the Humanities (RSUH; *Российский Государственный*

Гуманитарный Университет [RGGU]). RSUH was established in 1991 as the result of a merger between the Moscow State Institute for History and Archive and Moscow Public University. It is a system-wide school with its main campus in Moscow, nine branch campuses in the Moscow region, and 21 campuses throughout Russia. There are 30,941 students enrolled at RSUH, 13,759 of which study at the main campus in Moscow (Dies Academicus, 2012).

RSUH was chosen due to the personal connections that I have established there with the Deputy Director of the Russian-American Academic Center for American Studies, Dr. Marina Kaul. Russia is often identified as a relationship-based country (Gesteland, 2002); personal connections play a key role there in gaining access to students as well as scheduling and conducting activities.

Participants. Recruitment protocol. Following the results of the pilot program, I was particularly interested in freshmen, sophomore, and (possibly) junior students who were in the process of transferring to HEIs abroad. This population group of freshmen, sophomores, and juniors was chosen for a variety of reasons. First, this group was selected due to availability and access, both of which are important considerations in qualitative research. Indeed, the RSUH freshmen, sophomores, and juniors followed a set schedule and were available on campus five days a week, from either 8:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. or from 1:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. Second, during the pilot study, freshmen, sophomores, and juniors demonstrated a high level of engagement with a variety of SNSs, and their time investment seemed greater than that of upper-level students. Third, juniors were added to the pool of respondents due to their interest and maturity. In personal conversations, many juniors reported planning to transfer to an academic level

one year lower than their current academic level, which would make them similar to sophomores. Finally, it could be argued that freshmen, sophomores, and juniors who were planning to transfer abroad were better subjects because they had gained experiences in higher education and thus had a better sense of what they were looking for. As a result, they were more involved in the decision-making process than upper-level students due to the greater number of years they would need to spend abroad to complete their education, as well as a higher cumulative cost of study.

Dr. Kaul's academic appointment as a Chair of the Interdisciplinary English Language Department (non-English Majors, Departments of International Relationships, Philology, and Psychology) assisted in the recruitment of students from these three departments. She and I also outlined criteria that served as identifiers of students who were transferring to HEIs abroad (in addition to students' self-identification). These criteria included:

- Recently took the TOEFL or have scheduled to take the TOEFL.
- Demonstrated familiarity with websites focused on the recruitment of international students, such as EducationUSA.
- Reported attending the information session run by the American Councils, U.S. Commercial Services, UGRAD Program, and individual foreign HEIs.
- Participated in any of the Summer English Language Schools abroad.
- Used SNSs for acquiring information on HEIs abroad.

The freshmen, sophomores, and juniors from these three departments were invited to participate in the study via e-mail (see Appendix 1). For the eligibility questionnaire, please see Appendix 2. Per Dr. Kaul's recommendation, all interviews were conducted in

English because strong command of English is often a strong indicator of a student's ability and intent to transfer to an HEI abroad.

Interview protocol. Individual interviews were the main source of data for this study. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) emphasized that individual interviews allow participants to describe in detail how they have experienced the phenomenon. The interviews were loosely structured to encourage participants to share and explain their experiences and perspectives about the use of SNSs in their college choice decision-making process. The intent was to make the interviews conversational, rather than tightly structured around specific questions. I also used "bracketing" and set aside my personal experiences and notions in order to better understand how the phenomenon of using SNS for college choice appears to participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The participants were recruited based on their lived experiences with manipulating and using SNSs for college choice. The interview questionnaire was used as a guide (Appendix 3) rather than as a strict protocol. Depending on the respondent, answers sometimes included answers to different questions; in addition, answers were sometimes redundant and protocol departures occasionally occurred. However, overall, they added depth and details to the respondents' answers.

At the beginning of each interview, the participant had a chance to read an informed consent form. If the participant did not want to participate in the interview, he or she had a chance to refuse participation and leave. Before the actual interview process took place, each participant was assigned a code name for confidentiality protection, and some participants proposed a code name for themselves.

Data Analysis

The data analysis procedure was informed by the work of Creswell (2002, 2009) and Patton (2002). First, the steps related to data organization and preparation for analysis were taken. I began with the interview transcription, which was completed immediately after each conversation took place to ensure that all of the undertones, thoughts, and other verbal and nonverbal information were captured and retained as best as possible. Creswell (2002) recommended concentrating on first emphasizing meaning and then substance. These immediate and detailed transcriptions allowed for an improved capture of the underlying meaning, a step that assisted in gaining a better understanding of participants' personalities and experiences, including their subjective opinions and voices. These underlying meanings were also very helpful in capturing the general sense of who the students of Russia State University for Humanities are and what their search to transfer to HEIs abroad means. In addition, this process aided in creating a more multidimensional picture of how these particular students use SNSs for their college choice related activities and decisions. I used coded names and wrote a detailed story of each interviewed individual.

My second step included a search for themes and subthemes of the conversations and information provided. Merriam (2001) identified one of the goals of qualitative research as the development of a "thick description" of the researched phenomenon. The thick description requires the researcher to become very well acquainted with the respondents to be able to identify multiple contexts, themes, and subthemes. To reach this goal, I examined the obtained text for the presence of recurring ideas, which assisted in identifying general themes. I then developed a system of theme coding and subcoding. The coding process assisted in generating a description for each theme. My plan was to

perform an analytical coding which would help to understand how the SNSs were being used by the students during the process of making college choices and how students perceived SNSs' influence on their decisions. Analytical coding proved to be well-suited for this purpose, as it considered "the meaning in context and create[d] categories that express[ed] new ideas about data" (Richards, 2005, p. 94). Finally, I analyzed materials within themes for additional layers or subthemes of information. Each additional subtheme was also coded and described. The search for patterns within themes and subthemes was guided by the research questions of the study and by the relevant literature.

I also evaluated the data for its usefulness in informing the researched phenomenon. The narrative passage was used to convey the findings of the analysis and to provide a detailed discussion of the themes and subthemes. Some visual materials, such as graphs or tables, were developed to contribute to the data analysis and interpretation. The data interpretation process led to the development of theoretical constructs to determine the significance of the conclusions made.

Quality assurance. The literature emphasizes that quality assurance plays an important role in assuring that the research is credible, valid, trustworthy, and transferable (i.e., people in different settings can relate to this information; Creswell, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). There are many descriptions and debates about defining quality assurance concepts and equally as many frequently or occasionally used strategies and procedures to support these concepts.

I used several strategies to enhance the trustworthiness, validity, and transferability of this study. In order to assure trustworthiness, I ran a pilot study. The

pilot study informed improvements in creating a purposeful sampling, in data collection, and in the use of technology. These adjustments allowed aforementioned aspects of methodology to be more precise, more valid, and more focused on the study objectives. Other strategies included audio and video recording all interviews to preserve the content as well as the nonverbal communication and undertones of each discussion. This also helped to ensure that nothing was missing and to create a “shared experience.” During interviews, I used visual sources such as the websites of different SNSs to help students immediately “visualize” the description of their experiences and to assist them in providing a more accurate description.

The presence of different sources of information—verbal, nonverbal, and observations—created a triangulation of data that provided a coherent justification for the narrative and themes. After transcribing all interviews, I sent the written files to the participants for their review. After summarizing the findings of each interview, I e-mailed them to participants again for their review and feedback. Creswell (2002) called this exercise “member-checking to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific description or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate” (p. 196).

It is important to admit that some contradictions and biases should not and cannot be entirely avoided, as the purpose of phenomenological research is not to avoid all contradictions or to generate a solution. Rather, these small biases and contradictions may be indicative of the fact that additional work is needed in order to better understand what is occurring and to recognize that there are multiple realities within the phenomenon that need to be portrayed and further discussed (Stake, 2010). Moreover, contradictions

and biases are reflective of real life, as real life consists of different perspectives and experiences; therefore, discussing these discrepancies can contribute to the credibility of the data collected.

In addition, I tried to address and account for my own biases by making a list of my own predictions and expectations of what I would find. The literature emphasizes that it is important for a qualitative researcher to be aware of his or her own subjectivity (Creswell, 2002; Patton, 2002) and to admit that this subjectivity does exist instead of trying to conceal it. I was open with participants throughout the data collection process; the member-checking process described above prompted participants on several occasions to provide additional information not about what they had said, but about how they felt about the phenomenon being discussed, which is one of the goals of qualitative research (Richards & Morse, 2013).

Summary

The choice of a qualitative research approach was appropriate for this study, as qualitative inquiry is, in essence, conducted in the interest of understanding “why” and “how” something is being experienced, which should help to build awareness and expand knowledge. The interview data provided thick and rich insights into students’ diverse experiences with SNSs for college choice. These experiences, including perceptions and opinions, are better understood by asking questions; discussing responses; analyzing individuals’ recollections, opinions, and feelings; and searching for common themes and subthemes. This approach also seems appropriate for the theoretical framework developed in the literature review.

Chapter 4 will begin with a short description of each of the study participants. It will then present the findings collected during in-depth interviews with the participants. The findings are organized around themes and subthemes that were identified during data analysis and highlight how different participants made sense of and evaluated the role of SNSs in their decision-making process of transferring to HEIs abroad. As a researcher, I do not claim to identify any cause and effect or direct-linear correlations and relationships from the data. Rather, my aim is to inform higher education practice in general and enrollment offices in particular about the experiences of a group of undergraduate students from Moscow who are experiencing a common phenomenon—using SNSs in their decision-making process of transferring to HEIs abroad.

Chapter 4: Results

Part 1. Participants

Chapter 4 presents an analysis of interview transcripts, reflections, and the researcher's observations. The chapter will begin with a description of data collection and participant demographics. A profile of each participant and synopsis of each interview will then be presented. The chapter will also respond to the following three research questions:

1. What SNSs did students of Russia State University for Humanities (RSUH) use for their college choice activities?
2. What type of information on SNSs is being used by RSUH students for their college choice activities?
3. Were there any connections between type of information available on SNSs and RSUH students' choice of HEI in the US?

From the data analysis, several themes emerged and will be presented as they relate to each research question.

Participant selection and demographics. An e-mail with a questionnaire (Appendix 2) which was designed to determine students' eligibility for this study was sent to 201 students. The questionnaire highlighted steps that students who are interested in transferring to an HEI abroad typically take, such as taking the English Proficiency Test (TOEFL), visiting College Fairs, filling out college applications, and so forth. Respondents included freshmen, sophomores, and juniors of four departments: Art History (14 e-mails), Department of Management (62 e-mails), Philology (61 e-mails), and Psychology (64 e-mails). The e-mails included a brief description of the study, a

reference to the pilot study that was conducted at RSUH in April 2013 (Appendix 1), and a questionnaire. Students were asked to return their answers electronically at their earliest convenience. Approximately 48% of the responses, or 96 replies, were received within the first two days. Eight e-mail addresses were invalid and the e-mails were automatically returned as undeliverable. After seven days, a second e-mail was sent to the remaining 97 people. Within the next two weeks, 43 more responses were received. The response rate was 72%, or 139 answers.

Among 139 respondents, 13 students qualified for the study. Each of the qualified individuals received an individual invitation for an interview. Invitations included available timeframes for the interviews, information about interview location, and the Research Informed Consent Form (Appendix 4). All 13 students elected to participate in the interview. One student was interrupted by a phone call 15 min into her interview and had to leave. After several attempts to reschedule, this student withdrew from the study. Another student took over 10 weeks to schedule his interview and was interviewed in late August. Twelve students completed their interviews. Student demographics, majors, and self-reported transferring statuses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Background Information

Name ⁴	Gender	Year of Study	Major	Reported Transferring Status
American	Male	Sophomore	Clinical Psychology	Researching colleges and majors in the US
Bride	Female	Sophomore	Philology	Transferring, Fall of 2014
Expert	Female	Sophomore	History of Art Museology	Researching countries and universities to transfer
Musician	Male	Junior	Public Administration	Transferring, Fall of 2014
Newlywed Husband	Male	Junior	Public Administration	Transferring, Fall of 2014
Newlywed Wife	Female	Junior	Public Administration	Transferring, Fall of 2014
Novice	Male	Freshman	Public Administration	Transferring, Fall of 2014
Optimist	Male	Junior	Marketing	Transferring, Fall of 2014 or Winter of 2015
Philosopher	Male	Freshman	History of Art	Researching countries and universities to transfer
Polyglot	Female	Sophomore	Human Resource Management	Researching colleges and majors in the US
Prodigy	Male	Freshman	Philology	Transferring in the Fall of 2015
Sponge Bob	Male	Sophomore	Public Administration	Transferring in the Fall of 2014

⁴ All names are pseudonyms.

Participants. Who Are They?

American. American is a second-year student in the Department of Clinical Psychology. He spent sixth grade in Toronto, Canada and eighth and ninth grade in New York because his mother worked there for the Russian air carrier Aeroflot. American's aunt is a clinical physiologist who left Russia 18 years ago; she lives in California and works at Stanford. American's choice of major is partially due to his aunt's

influence. Initially, American's plan was to obtain his undergraduate degree in Russia because it is more affordable. After receiving an undergraduate degree, he would apply for a graduate school in the United States. However, he recently changed his mind because of some political and economic changes in Russia. He is afraid that these changes will make leaving Russian more difficult and feels he is "better taking his chances now."

American was in early stages of the transferring process: He recently passed the TOEFL with a reasonably high score. As part of his process of researching colleges in the US, he contacted EducateUSA and attended an International College Fair. At the College Fair, American collected some brochures about colleges, but found their content duplicative of the HEI websites. He also spoke to academic advisors and found them to be friendly and knowledgeable, but also too busy for a real conversation. As a follow-up, American e-mailed a few advisors, but received no replies.

American felt that his aunt's advice and social media were the best sources of information. He is an active user of VKontakte and Facebook and a loyal reader of LiveJournal blogs. He particularly likes blogs that describe how people adapt to American realities. He does not like official college websites, as he feels they are more

for show; the reality can only be found in the actual stories of real people. American also utilizes TED as a source of information. He pays attention to what colleges TED speakers attended and stated that “it tells volumes about this university.” American also reads HEI admission blogs and Twitter pages.

American recommended using all available sources of information to learn more about HEIs abroad, including brochures, conversations, SNSs, conversations with people from social network groups, blog posts, and College Fairs. In his opinion, any source of information was useful in making such an important and difficult decision, as transferring abroad and studying abroad is a huge, often uncomfortable, and very expensive undertaking. He also warned that SNSs were not censored and anyone could post anything; therefore, the majority of posts were opinions and not facts. He emphasized that using SNSs was always a very time-consuming process that took more time than one ever planned to spend.

Bride. Bride is finishing her second year in the Department of Philology. She has been accepted to Arizona State University and will start her studies there in the Fall of 2014. After her freshman year in college, Bride worked on a tourism-work visa at a restaurant in Fort Myers, Florida. There she met a man who was working at the Everglades Park after graduating from the University of Maine Parks and Recreation Management Program. They fell in love and soon were engaged to be married. Bride’s fiancé convinced her to apply to the university (Arizona State) where he had already been accepted to the PhD program in Community Resources and Development.

Studying outside of Russia had never crossed Bride’s mind until she met her fiancé. He played the role of a “pull factor” by “pulling” her to transfer to the same

university where he had been accepted into a PhD program, but to Business or Education programs. She agreed and her fiancé did all the work to arrange for her transfer to Arizona State. These steps concluded her college choice process.

Bride has VK and Instagram accounts. Recently, she has mostly been using Skype and Viber to stay connected to her fiancé and to obtain as much information about her “new life” as possible. Bride’s fiancé uses Skype to show her the Arizona State campus, his everyday activities, his friends, and the city of Phoenix. Per her fiancé’s arrangements, Bride also uses Skype for studying; she takes her English lessons via Skype. She is very happy about this arrangement; it feels as if she and her teacher are in the same room. Achieving high SAT and TOEFL scores is very important to Bride, as it will hopefully help her to obtain a scholarship to study in the US. Her parents will sell their car, but it is not enough to pay tuition for two or even three years of study in the USA.

If someone were to ask Bride about the best way to learn about colleges outside of Russia, she would recommend finding someone in that country who can help. Bride confesses that perhaps some information is available on SNSs, but she is not proficient enough in SNSs to know where to begin. In addition, she does not feel proficient enough to give any feedback about SNSs.

Expert. Expert is a second-year student in the Museology Program. Her plan is to obtain a fundamental education at RSUH and then transfer abroad for the last two years of study. She feels that a degree from an institution in Europe or the US would offer better economic opportunities. Expert is in the process of reading about higher education in Europe and the US so that she can choose the right country and best school

for herself. She relies solely on SNSs and considers them to be the best sources of information about HEIs abroad. She is an active user of VKontakte (over 1,000 friends), Instagram (412 followers), Askbook.me, and Tumblr. She posts statuses, questions, comments, and even surveys. She is a more passive user of Facebook, Twitter, LiveJournal blogs, Diary.ru, and Deviant Art, which means that she reads posts, but hardly posts anything herself, because the audience there is more international and she is not comfortable with her written English.

Expert took the TOEFL a couple months ago, but her TOEFL score needed improvement, so she has made no specific plans to transfer yet. She described herself as an unbiased fan of social media. She feels that SNSs are a very powerful and integral part of the lives of today's youth, but recognizes that SNSs have a negative side as well. First, she expressed her concern that every word posted on any SNS was visible and up for interpretation by anyone; as a result, users are forced to filter the content of posts, which detracts from their honesty. She also dislikes the social pressure of numbers (number of followers, likes, shares, and so forth) that SNS users impose on themselves; she even had some friends who stopped communicating with her because she didn't "like" their posts (i.e., didn't click the "like" button). However, in her view, these problems are outweighed by the opportunities for communication and information sharing that SNSs provide. If asked what sources of information one should use to learn more about colleges, Expert would recommend VK for Russian students and Twitter and Instagram for everyone else.

Musician. Musician is a third-year student in the Department of Management, Public Administration program. He plays guitar and drums with two groups. Musician

does not like his major; it was not his choice, but the choice his parents made for him. He is also unhappy about life in Russia and about the country's administration. He feels that Russia is on the verge of collapsing financially and morally and wants to escape "before any blood spills." Musician's parents are well off and have strongly encouraged him to look for educational opportunities abroad. They also financed his travel abroad and his study of English. He will start working toward his bachelor's degree in the US in the Fall of 2014. According to Musician, "...all steps are made, all exams taken, applications submitted, plans finalized."

The major challenge in Musician's transferring process was choosing a major. His parents supported him in everything except for his choice of major. He wanted to study music and play guitar or drums. His parents considered music a hobby, not a major, and wanted him to major in business and play music on the side. However, he was able to find a major that worked for him and for his parents, and did so with the help of social media.

Musician explained that one day he shared his frustration with his parents' demands on his VK Wall. People commented and one person mentioned a degree in Music and Entertainment Management, something of which Musician had never heard. The comment came from a stranger and was very brief, but the idea was appealing because, as Musician shared, "it united passion for music with business." This recommendation directed his search for a major; institutional websites helped him in selecting an HEI.

Musician commented that although SNSs are not an integral part of his life, as they are for many of his peers, they provide for unexpected contacts and an abundance of

information from all venues of life. He felt that each SNS had its own unique features, but they were only helpful if one knew how to use them or if one was looking for something very particular. Otherwise, SNSs were only good for making his social life more exciting.

Newlyweds. Newlyweds asked to be interviewed together. They are third-year students in the Department of Management, Public Administration program and have already finalized their plans to transfer to Southern Illinois University in the Fall of 2014. Newlyweds have been together since high school. Their original plan was to get married after graduation, but they decided to marry now to make visa requirements more straightforward.

In 2009, one of the Newlyweds (Husband)⁵ spent one year in the United States as a high school exchange student. During that year in the US, he took the SAT and a TOEFL test. A year after his return to Russia, he visited his host family in the US and they took him to visit several college campuses where he met with several college advisers. He was very interested in attending college in the US and his American family was encouraging, but it was not feasible for his own family at that time. His initial plan was to obtain an undergraduate education in Russia and then apply for graduate school in the US. NH made this decision after several discussions with his host family, his high school college counselor (in the US), and college advisers, who convinced NH that it would be more financially prudent for him to finish his undergraduate education in Russia, because in graduate school he would have a chance to receive some assistance

⁵ Newlywed Husband (NH) and Newlywed Wife (NW)

that could help to cover his tuition. He said that these three groups of people helped him with his decision to study abroad.

Political and economic events in Russia played the role of push factors and prompted Newlywed to change his mind. In December 2013, after unrest in Ukraine, he and his fiancé started making inquiries to different colleges in the US regarding transferring. They also began a very intensive search on SNSs for specific information, such as tuition, a cost of living, availability of scholarships for international students, and opportunities to find jobs in the US after graduation. Newlyweds' families were very supportive of their decision to transfer to the US and made arrangements to collect money to pay their tuition.

Newlyweds read blogs on LiveJournal and Echo Moskvyy and joined several groups on LinkedIn, Facebook, and VK. They commented that each SNS had positive and negative features, but the description of “positive” and “negative” and views of positivity and negativity heavily depended on the user and the user's goals. For instance, NW used to be active on Askbook, a very informative website with hundreds of thousands of users. People can post questions there and anyone can answer. However, for college-related searches, Askbook was useless due to the lower caliber of discussants—mostly high school students—and discussion topics, which mostly centered around simple, everyday subjects such as cosmetics, high school romance, clothes, and so forth. On the other hand, LinkedIn, Facebook, and VK proved to be very useful, as the discussions and participants were “of higher and more intellectual quality.” Newlyweds felt that they could not recommend any specific sources of information in regards to

college choice decision making, as the interests of individuals differ. They suggested visiting campuses first and then following up with inquiries through SNSs.

Novice. Novice is a first-year student in the Department of Management, Public Administration program. Two years ago, while in high school, he visited the US with his family. He liked the country very much, as did his parents, who later convinced Novice to apply to college in the US. After high school graduation, Novice was unable to complete all the paperwork on time, so he applied to RSUH instead. He is now finishing his first year of study in Russia, and in the Fall of 2014, will transfer to a community college in the Seattle area, where friends of his family live. His plan is to take as many English language courses as possible at Seattle Central Community College (SCCC) and to transfer some of the credits he earned at RSUH. From SCCC, Novice wants to transfer to one of the universities in the Seattle metro area.

Novice's parents assisted a great deal in his transferring process. They hired a private education agency in Moscow that helped students apply for colleges abroad. This agency assisted Novice with the college selection and application process. Per Novice's parents' request, the agency focused specifically on the Northwestern US. In addition, Novice's father conversed electronically with several counselors from the universities suggested by his friends. His father was able to find counselors by posting questions on the Twitter accounts of Seattle University and the University of Washington. Through brief message exchanges with counselors, Novice and his father received some useful information about the application process; they also started following several universities' SNSs and read student blogs.

Novice and his father follow the Facebook and Twitter accounts for international students and the Instagram accounts of three universities: Washington State University, University of Washington, and Seattle University. Universities' Twitter and FB feeds provide updates about student life, academic changes, sports events, music events, and so forth. Novice and his family were able to follow all of the updates and communicate with some of the international students.

Novice used SNSs because he was advised to do so by the education agency and by the university counselors. The SNSs gave him some perspective about student life and requirements for transfer. He did very little independently in relationship to his college choice, as the education agency suggested places of study for him based on his geographic area of interest and his TOEFL scores. Novice admitted that the very idea of community college came to him from his parents' friends in the US. After hearing about community colleges, Novice's father requested an education agency to provide more information about this option. The review furnished by the agency helped Novice and his family to realize that community college may be the most cost-efficient choice.

Novice's family also watched a TV show entitled *Community College*, which was translated into Russian. It was the only show about higher education in the US that was translated into Russian. Novice loved the show. He appreciated the great variety of students who attended community college, he liked the atmosphere—very friendly and laid back—and he liked the relationships among the characters. He understood it was just a show, but felt that any show should reflect the reality at least somewhat, and he liked this reality. Novice felt that attending community college would be a very good transitional step for him.

After Novice learned that he was admitted, a counselor from the education agency advised him and his father to follow the SNS pages of Seattle Central Community College. From the college's Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube pages, Novice learned what this college campus looked like, how students dressed, specifics about the role of advisers, and gained some information about expenses. However, the information he received from his fathers' friends and from the counselor at the education agency was more detailed and, therefore, even more valuable. His father's friends also paired Novice with a family friend who was studying at this community college. Additionally, they themselves took English and some computer classes there when they first immigrated to the US, so Novice received plenty of good advice.

Novice felt that the best way to learn about universities and colleges abroad is from friends and family members—people who have first-hand experience and who “know you, care about you, they can... talk [to] your interest. No social media can do it.”

Optimist. Optimist is a third-year student in the School of Management, Marketing program. He is in a process of transferring to Eitvos Lorand University in Hungary. His plan is to transfer there in the Fall of 2014 or Winter of 2015. Depending on the number of transferable credits, he will be there for at least two years before he finishes his studies. Optimist's current major is marketing and advertising. He enjoys it and is looking for a similar major, but preferably with a different angle—for instance, the psychology of advertising or communications. This change could delay his graduation for at least another year.

Optimist elected Hungary because he already has friends and connections there. In the Fall of 2011, he started taking English language classes with a private tutor who told him about the International Jewish Summer camp in Hungary and referred him there. In the Summer of 2012, he was hired there as a counselor and has attended every year since. While working in Hungary, Optimist made many Hungarian friends. They introduced him to opportunities and life in Hungary. He also traveled around Hungary; fell in love with the country, culture, and people; and visited several universities where his friends have attended. It helped him to realize that Hungary is the country where he wants to live and study.

Optimist feels lucky to have had friends in Hungary who provided him with good advice about universities and programs of study. He considered this to be the best way to get information, rather than relying “on strangers” from SNS or on brochures and flyers. Personal opinions of his friends and camp colleagues, as well as their advice and stories, were the primary sources of information that guided Optimist’s decision-making process. Optimist stated that universities furnished information through websites, brochures, and their own SNSs, but felt that without a personal visit, it was not enough to make an informed college choice.

Optimist has Facebook, VK, and Instagram accounts. He is also an administrator of the VK page for the campers and is responsible for communicating with previous and future campers. He is a member of the VK RSUH group. He is using his SNSs mostly for social interactions and to stay connected with friends. He is not using SNSs to select a university, although sometimes he asks his FB and VK friends to do “the leg work” for him, such as checking out the dorms and distance from the dorms to campus, finding out

more information about the language of study (i.e., English versus Hungarian), or identifying the best Hungarian language classes. In this sense, SNSs are useful in regards to the friends he made through these sites. He can write a request to his friends and receive an accurate response within just a few hours or even minutes; without SNSs, this would not be possible. He enjoys SNSs a great deal, but is not addicted to him, as are some of his friends.

Overall, SNSs did not assist Optimist in his college search because he had friends who could provide him with information and because he had been living in the country for some time and had visited several universities himself. However, he stated that he would advise students to use SNSs to research colleges, especially if they did not have friends abroad or did not have an opportunity to spend some time in the country or on campus. In his opinion, there was nothing better than personal contacts, but he would rank SNSs as the second best option for obtaining information about colleges.

Philosopher. Philosopher is a first-year student majoring in the History of Art. He speaks slowly in refined, almost artificially perfect English. He is very interested in transferring to a university abroad. Through RSUH he had the opportunity to attend a university abroad as an exchange student, but in his view, it was too limiting, “like a trailer of a movie.” He continued this comparison, stating that he would prefer watching the entire film or attending university abroad as a regular student: “It would expand my horizons and give a complete experience of a different education system and of different aspects of life.”

Philosopher’s first step was to decide what country and what school he wanted to transfer to. His first priority was to study in Italy, because of its “ancient beauty and

marvelous culture and history,” but he was also very interested in the United States, because of the “entrepreneurial spirit, energy, and overabundance of opportunities there.” He eventually chose the US because, as he stated, “The United States of America is the land of opportunities more than any other country on the globe and I would like to be part of this exhilarating, boundless environment where everything is possible.” In March 2014, Philosopher took the TOEFL and obtained a rather high score. As a result, he started receiving packets of information from different colleges.

After learning more about higher education in the US, Philosopher realized that the high cost of tuition could prevent him from studying there. He felt that in order to fulfill his dream, he had to perform a great deal very diligent and careful research. Philosopher began his research journey by visiting various institutions’ websites. He commented that unlike university websites in Russia, the websites of the universities abroad were actually informative and good sources of information, but only if regularly updated. After some searches, Philosopher was skeptical as to whether these sites were regularly updated. He also commented that “...all these smiles, testimonials, virtual trips, pictures, YouTube videos, and similar promotional tricks each site boast create unwelcome pressure and make me uncomfortable.” According to Philosopher, another limitation of websites was that foreigners only visited websites of HEIs they were aware of. For instance, if Philosopher was unaware of Indiana University or Purdue University, he would never look into these schools’ websites, as he would not search for something that did not already exist in his mind. As the result, he felt that by visiting institutional websites, he was deepening his knowledge of the universities he already knew about and was not discovering any new institutions. Philosopher’s second step was a visit to the

Moscow International College Fair, which he also found to be frustrating and sales-oriented.

After these two unsuccessful steps, Philosopher resorted exclusively to social media. He managed to obtain a formidable amount of information about different colleges and programs through SNSs such as Facebook, LiveJournal, Diary.com (the English version), and Tumblr. To someone in search of knowledge about HEIs, Philosopher would recommend learning enough English to be comfortable navigating and using English-based SNSs, or at least using FB, as it is more heavily populated by foreigners and could present multidimensional perspectives.

Philosopher felt that learning how to use SNSs to one's advantage took the average person too much time. He also warned that the overall use of SNSs was time-consuming, because of many unrelated, but interesting, posts and opinions that one inevitably stumbled upon and felt compelled to read. His final warning was related to the human perspectives that SNSs provide, as some people trust other people's stories, while others find these stories biased and unwarranted.

Polyglot. Polyglot is a second-year student in the School of Management, Human Resource Management program. She speaks fluent English with a refined British accent and remarks that her strict private tutor, who values proper English, is from Great Britain. Polyglot's passion is foreign languages. In addition to Russian and English, she speaks Italian and takes Spanish lessons online.

Polyglot reported being disappointed with the quality of education at RSUH overall and with her program of study in particular. Unlike students whose education was paid for by the state, her study was paid for by her parents. She complained about

the high tuition at RSUH and the low “value” she received in return. Polyglot felt that she should have not spent any time and money studying in Russia, but should have started her education in Europe or the US directly after high school. She had vacationed and studied English in many countries; she also officially worked as an interpreter for her father. Long ago, her travels and experiences abroad convinced her that she would prefer the US to any other country. Her TOEFL score was very high and she was in a process of selecting which HEI to transfer to and which major to choose.

Polyglot has VKontakte, Instagram, and Facebook accounts, as well as a Tuenti.com account, which is an analogue of Facebook in Spanish. She has online friends from many countries, some of whom she met while taking language courses abroad. She joined their SNS accounts as a friend. After many talks with her friends from different online communities, Polyglot narrowed her selection of HEIs: She elected to search for universities in California due to the free-spirited lifestyle that seemed to be a hallmark of the state.

Polyglot found most of her college choice information on SNSs, but admitted that this information could be biased. She liked the variety of opinions she was able to receive using SNS sources to annul people’s biases: “Multitude of opinions, option of talking to people from everywhere in the world, very practical and fun suggestions, live pictures, face-to-face talks—these features of social media are great and incomparable to anything else.”

For Polygot, the biggest challenge of using SNSs was managing her time. She shared that it is very easy for her to spend hours and hours reading posts and comments, because they are interesting and entertaining:

Some discussions can be very useful with small deviations of opinions, but sometimes the spectrum of opinions is very wide and sorting everything out takes hours. Moreover, it is tempting to digress and start discussing something unrelated, so one has to learn how to stay focused. And it is a rather challenging task.

Polyglot emphasized that she did not want to portray SNSs as the best sources of information for making a college choice; SNSs were not for everyone, but were the best sources of information for her personally. She felt that by connecting with students from different countries, one could learn about these countries' cultures and way of living; in addition, it was a great way to find like-minded people. She concluded that in the contemporary world, avoiding social media is not possible, so it is to one's advantage to learn how to make the most of it.

Prodigy. Prodigy is a first-year student in the Department of Philology. He graduated from a high school with an intensive English language program and spent the last two summers studying English in the UK and US. During the Summer of 2013, after graduating from high school, he and his parents visited friends in New York and made trips to seven East Coast colleges: Brown, Princeton, Harvard, Columbia, Yale, MIT, and NYU. His favorite thing about the US is the Bubba Gump restaurant. *Forrest Gump* is his favorite movie.

Prodigy plans to transfer to one of the aforementioned schools; Harvard, MIT, and Princeton are his first choices. He would have preferred to start his education in the US because he feels that education in the US is stronger academically, but his parents were adamant about him studying in Russia until he turned 18. He spent 2013 learning where

to study and what to study, and planned to spend 2014 taking all of the necessary steps to transfer. His plan was to transfer in the Fall of 2015 after he finishes his second year of study in RSUH.

Prodigy collected information about universities abroad from different sources. Both he and his parents followed the Facebook and Twitter accounts of individuals as well as the institutional social media accounts of all seven schools. He and his father also found several Russian faculty members at different departments of these universities and followed their Facebook, Google+, and Twitter pages. Prodigy does not have VKontakte or Odnoklassniki accounts. His parents, particularly his father, are very involved in his search.

Prodigy estimated that after making a decision to transfer to a university in the US, he was spending 50-60 min a day on SNSs learning about different U.S. universities, higher education in the US, campus life, and research opportunities. He found this amount of time to be reasonable and not too burdensome.

There was nothing he did not like about SNSs and felt that he would not be able to choose his course of study without them. However, he was only using three SNSs and therefore considered his opinion to be somewhat limited. If asked what source(s) of information one should use to find out more about colleges, he would recommend starting with college websites to acquire some initial information. The second step should be communicating with experts that could be found through Facebook, Twitter, or some other SNS. In his opinion, this approach would help to create an unbiased, multidimensional, and more accurate picture.

Sponge Bob. Sponge Bob is this respondent's favorite character and he requested to be called this name or "Bob" for short. Sponge Bob's parents immigrated to New York in 1999 when he was 4 years old. He grew up in Brooklyn. When Sponge Bob was in eighth grade, his parents got divorced, and his mother remarried and moved to Portland, Oregon. Sponge Bob remained with his father; he and his dad moved back to Moscow, because his father had a successful business there.

For his senior year, Sponge Bob planned to attend school in Oregon to secure in-state tuition for college. However, he did not get along with his stepfather. His mother married an Orthodox Jew, the house rules were very strict, and Sponge Bob's stepfather was only willing to support Sponge Bob if he applied to study in Yeshiva. Sponge Bob returned to Moscow and applied to RSUH. His intent was to study in RSUH for two years (and pay a lower tuition) and then to transfer to a university in the US for his junior and senior years.

As of now, Sponge Bob has applied to several HEIs in New York. He elected to study in New York because he had friends and family there and because flights from Moscow to New York were nonstop and the least expensive. Sponge Bob's GPA is 4.0 and his ACT score is 32. He is proud of being accepted to several HEIs and will attend Baruch College, Zicklin School of Business, in the Fall of 2014. He was offered a substantial scholarship there.

An active blogger, Sponge Bob runs a popular blog on LiveJournal describing his experiences in Russia and in the US, and is often asked questions about life in the US. He has Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, VKontakte, and Google+ accounts, but uses these accounts mostly to promote his blog. Sponge Bob stated that he is a heavy user of SNSs;

SNSs represent an important part of his life because of their convenience and simplicity. He uses different SNSs for entertainment, for chatting with friends, and for obtaining information. He also feels that for many users, SNSs create a false sense of belonging. People do not learn how to be friends in real life, because “they are satisfied with virtual reality.” In summary, if someone asks what sources should be used to learn about HEIs abroad, Sponge Bob would first recommend campus visits and then personal or Skype (if possible) connections with advisors, faculty, admissions officers, and friends. In his opinion, social media sites are most useful after these steps are taken and work best as a complimentary source of information.

Summary. As the profiles indicated, respondents came from various backgrounds. Some respondents had visited college campuses abroad and had previous experience living or traveling abroad, while others did not. Some respondents involved their parents or relatives in their college choice process and others made their decisions independently. Some respondents were active users of many SNSs, while others passively used only one or two SNSs in a somewhat “lighter,” less time-consuming manner. Some respondents reached out to SNSs to learn about scholarships, some looked for information related to opportunities for employment after graduation, and some were interested in visualizing realities on campus. Eight students had concluded their college choice process, two respondents were in the advanced stages of their college choice process, and two students, Expert and Philosopher, were in the very early stages of the process, namely selecting countries in which to study.

Three patterns of SNS use emerged. Three students reported relying exclusively on SNSs for their college choice. One respondent reported not using SNSs for her

college choice at all and two had used SNSs for college choice activities at a very minimal level. Six respondents reported combining the use of SNSs with information from other sources. Although each path was different, the data revealed several commonalities which will be discussed in the second part of the chapter.

Part 2. Research Questions

Research Question (RQ) #1. What SNSs did students of Russia State University for Humanities (RSUH) use for their college choice activities? The answer to this question revealed three major themes. The first theme is focused on whether or not participants utilized SNSs for their college choice activities. Some participants had some social media accounts, but reported not using SNSs for their college choice activities. Some participants relied exclusively on SNSs, while others used a combination of different information sources. The second theme reveals passive and active patterns of SNS use. The third theme highlights the five most popular SNSs, as identified by study participants, and reveals specific features of popular SNSs as described by the study participants through the lens of their college choice activities.

RQ#1. Theme 1. To use or not to use SNS.

Not to use. Three of the respondents—Bride, Novice, and Optimist—reported that, although they had SNS accounts, for their college search activities they elected to rely on sources other than SNSs. Bride reported depending entirely on her American fiancé's advice and decisions:

I didn't know anything about... I mean universities in [the United] States. Brian [fiancé] is American. He speaks English. I didn't even know what to search,

what [is] important and what [is] not. Brian wanted me to go [to US] with him and he said: “Don’t worry, be happy.”⁶

Novice relied on the advice provided by family friends who lived in the US and on reports furnished by the education agency. In addition, his decision to attend community college was somewhat confirmed not by SNSs, but rather by the TV show *Community College*.

It [the show] was very funny. These characters are, like...real. I liked them. You know... The Indian guy, the older guy, he is hilarious. The teacher, I mean, they all [are] funny. I like [them]. It’s not like here. It’s fun. I know, you [are] probably thinking: “He is crazy! Who believe in television shows, right!?” But I believe in each show [there is] some reality. I loved it. Like, I LOVED it! I was like, that community college, its, you know, must be, like...fun, like easy-funny. I mean...fun place to be.

Optimist, although a rather “heavy” and active user of SNSs, reported a minimal use of SNSs for college choice activities because he had access to alternative sources of information. Optimist spent a substantial amount of time in Hungary, made friends with local students, and selected Hungary as his place of study. He later received information about colleges and universities from his friends, went on several college visits, and picked a university for his future studies.

All three students had local sources of information—a fiancé from the US, local friends, and the opportunity for college visits—in which they trusted. Coincidentally, these respondents, unlike other study participants, did not report searching for or needing information related to employment after graduation or financing their education. As a

⁶ Quotes reflect the original grammar and style of responses

result, their college search activities were less intensive and more passive. Therefore, it seems that students who had friends, relatives, or other sources of guidance abroad, and who were not concerned with finding information related to financing their education or careers options available after graduation, were less likely to use SNSs for their college choice activities.

Let's use SNS. Three respondents, Expert, Philosopher, and Polyglot, reported relying solely on SNSs for their college choice activities. Expert and Polyglot provided no verbal explanation for this exclusivity. However, during her interview, Expert stated:

I feel, like, eh...naked without my iPhone. If I can't find it, I am...eh...scared. What [am] I going to do?! What [am] I going to do?! Where is it?! It's like, like... panic [attack]. I feel like real..., you know, real scare[d]. It's extension of my hand. Like all my life [is] here ... [tap on the iPhone].

Similar sentiments were expressed by Polyglot:

I live online. Literally. All my friends [are] there. All I need [is] here. You know... My entire world is in... [show the iPhone]. And everything [is] here the moment I need it."

Both Expert and Polyglot had their iPhones on the desk next to them during their interviews. They glanced at their phones often and grabbed them each time there was a sound of an e-mail or a text. At one point, Expert had to excuse herself and answer an "urgent text." During the interview with Expert, the messaging or e-mail sounds were heard at least 14 times; during the interview with Polyglot, I heard these sounds twice.

The third participant who reported relying solely on SNSs was Philosopher. He stated that he felt dissatisfied with all sources of information except for SNSs. One reason for his dissatisfaction was the aggressive nature of other media.

The websites... All these smiles, testimonials, picture, virtual trips, YouTube videos... They are inexcusably too much. Too much pressure and too much artificial cheerfulness... Doesn't it make you uncomfortable? It must make you uncomfortable or at least uneasy. They [promotional materials on websites] are overwhelming and ridiculously obtrusive... I feel like someone is shaking me, forcing me, "Listen to me! Look at me! I am stunning! I am amazing! You must do what I say! Buy me!" I call it an omnipotent desire to sell and then sell some more!

Philosopher declared finding non-SNS sources of information to be aggressive and invasive. His description of International College Fairs was as follows:

This was a circus-like, very frustrating experience. It was targeted at small-minded individuals with interests in superficial things. You know what I mean. You saw these displays, right? The glossy brochures, and these cheap glitzy trinkets, like Englishmen brought to Indians, you understand, right? I loathe these bright smiles. The representatives... They mean nothing. Oh, really! Oh, very nice to meet you! They were insulting. I am sure, these people, eh... You call them recruiters, right...seem to care solely about obtaining visitors' e-mails.

They would hunt [people] into their nets later. It's all fake; not for me.

In addition to finding all sources of information other than SNSs to be obtrusive, Philosopher questioned the accuracy of traditional sources of information:

Take websites. They are useful only if regularly updated... I am dubious they are regularly updated. I see no indication of expeditious nature and diligence in updates. Do you?

He also added that the use of traditional sources of information, particularly websites, requires prior knowledge of the institution.

I trust you realize how universities and universities' websites are discovered. If I have not heard of Indiana University, I would not search for it. I can't search for something that doesn't exist in my head. It is like...students from Indiana University would never look for a university in, um...Tula, because they probably don't know of this Tula-place or of universities in Tula. They [websites] are passive and, as such, more or less useless.

The unsatisfactory experience with the College Fair and perceived limitations presented on websites and other more traditional sources of information encouraged Philosopher to conduct his college choice research exclusively on SNSs. He felt he had more control over SNSs' "behavior" because he had a choice of what to see and when to stop.

All sources of information are good. The remaining six students seemed to combine the use of SNSs with the variety of other sources. American stated that although the advice of his aunt was his primary guidance, he also sought the opinions of his social media friends. For instance, his aunt emphasized that Stanford was very competitive and encouraged American to research other universities in California, on the West Coast, and in the US. Together, while on Skype, they looked at the admission criteria of a few schools, but then he connected with students of several schools to learn more about

campuses, academic expectations, and social life. In addition, American reported reading brochures, conversing with the advisors at the College Fair, and seeking guidance from his relative. He had also lived in the US before, which was helpful in understanding and evaluating some of the concepts presented through SNSs, websites, and printed materials.

Musician combined information from SNSs with reading HEI websites and with visits to the US, the country of his future studies. Newlyweds used SNSs as a compliment to prior college visits and meetings with college advisors. In addition, they sought the advice of their American friends in the US. Prodigy conducted college visits as well and utilized the advice of faculty members whom he found through SNS. Sponge Bob had spent 10 years in the US, from the ages of 4 to 14. After returning to Moscow, he visited the US several times, conducted college visits, and complimented knowledge obtained through conversations with college advisers, relatives, and local students with information available on institutional SNSs.

Summary. Some respondents can be described as “heavy” SNS users, while others can be deemed “light” SNS users. In the absence of a definition of heavy versus light SNS users, study participants were identified as such based on their self-reported patterns of SNS use. Heavy SNS users had several SNS accounts, spent over 1 hr per day reading different SNS posts, and visited various SNSs frequently and regularly. Light SNS users had one or two accounts and visited them rather sporadically. For the majority of respondents, the use of SNSs for college choice was combined with the use of other sources of information. For respondents who had connections abroad or who visited foreign countries and campuses prior to making their college choice decisions, the opinions of their international friends and colleagues seemed to take priority in guiding

their decision-making process over information from SNSs. Coincidentally, these respondents also seemed to be less interested in learning about employment after graduation or about financing their education. For respondents with no connections abroad, SNSs took priority as the source of information that guided their college choice. Official or formal sources of information, such as college websites, brochures, and College Fairs, seemed to be least popular among respondents. Respondents felt that these sources of information were unreliable and inaccurate.

RQ#1. Theme 2. Passive and active patterns of SNS use. Some respondents described themselves as passive users of SNS: They read the material of other users, but did not ask questions, offered no comments, and did not post pictures. Other participants described themselves as active users because, in addition to reading other people's posts, they actively asked questions, commented on people's posts, participated in discussions, and shared personal opinions, articles, and links on their own and other people's SNS pages. Participants' choice and a pattern of SNS use are presented in Table 2.

Based on respondents' comments, active use of various SNSs was linked to a proficiency in English. Perceived inadequacies in English proficiency seemed to prevent some respondents from actively seeking information on SNSs that were considered to be "foreign," such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, or LinkedIn, even though these sites offered an opportunity to write in Russian and many members of these sites write in Russian. For instance, in explaining her pattern of using social media, Expert stated, "I would read other people[']s posts on Facebook and Twitter, but would not ask questions. My English isn't good enough, you know, for [a] public. I don't want to look stupid or miss [something]." Bride shared this feeling: "I need to improve my English to

feel...good. Ask questions. I don't know...like post comments. If I post...on my VK wall, it is natural, because it's in Russian.”

Table 2

Active and Passive SNS Use for College Choice Activities

	Actively ⁷	Passively ⁸	Total
Vkontakte	7	5	12
Facebook	5	6	11
Instagram	8	0	8
Twitter	3	3	6
Blogs	1	5	6
Youtube.com	0	4	4
LinkedIn	0	3	3
Google+	0	3	3
Askbook.me	2	0	2
DeviantArt	0	2	2
Quora	1	0	1
TED	0	1	1
Tuinti.com	1	0	1
Vimeo.com	0	1	1

In contrast, American, Newlyweds, Polyglot, Philosopher, Prodigy, and Sponge Bob reported initiating conversations, asking questions, and posting status updates and

⁷ Active Use: SNS being used to actively post questions, comments, links and other materials

⁸ Passive Use: SNS being used to read other people questions, comments, links and other materials.

comments on all of the SNSs. None of these six respondents expressed concerns related to their English proficiency. They also reported having strong TOEFL scores.

RQ#1. Theme 3. What social network sites students used and why? As indicated in Table 2, the most popular SNSs among respondents were VKontakte (VK), Facebook (FB), Instagram, Twitter, and blogs. Respondents also shared opinions about what helped the most popular sites gain their popularity among RSUH students. In this section, each of these five SNSs will be discussed. I will also share respondents' arguments for each of the five sites' popularity and recognition.

VKontakte. All respondents attributed the popularity of VK to the fact that this SNS is in Russian, and consequently, the majority of posts are made by members of the Russian community and reflect the needs of the Russian population. Expert stated:

In Russia, VKontakte is more popular than any other SNS. More popular than Facebook. I know Facebook is used by millions, more [people] use [it] than VKontakte, but not in Russia. VKontakte all posts [are] in Russian, so only people who live in Russia or know Russian...like, you know...their own, yes, like native...language, can post there. [The] views [of these people] are different and this outline[s] the content. I mean, Russian people are writing about what they need. It is the content. I like it. It's about what's close to me, in my home. We have groups in VKontakte, our department, and there are many practical updates here.

Optimist highlighted the convenience of being able to write in Russian.

I stay in line in...*столовая* [cafeteria] and I hear a buzz. Notification, you know. Someone [made] a comment, post, something... I read or comment right away.

Because it's in Russian, I don't have to think or anything. English, it's, you know, it [is] like work for me. I have to think... Grammar, spelling, how to say this, how to say that. Do I sound stupid? I have to think. VKontakte. I just type, no extra thinking... Easy.

This opinion was seconded by Expert. Bride and Philosopher also stated that it was almost obligatory in Russia to have a VK account, even among people with a minimal interest in social media. The Bride elaborated, "It is, like, you know, obligatory. Like, 'I'll send you DM [direct message]. How do you mean you don't have it [VK]?' Or, 'Your wall is empty. What's up?'" Even if you don't want to use it... I mean VKontakte. Even if you don't need it... You go and open [an account]"

While some respondents were complimentary of VK, three respondents made negative comments. One of the negative comments about VK membership was related to its predominant language being Russian. Prodigy stated:

VKontakte is... You know how they say... In Russian for Russians by Russians. For some people, it is great, for me, it's not so great. I mean, the site offers a one-sided opinion. Me and my parents don't even have VKontakte.

Novice offered a similar opinion. He commented that his family friends in Seattle recommended avoiding VK completely, or at least not relying on information from that SNS, because of its biases.

Our friends said VKontakte is a Russian site. All posts are made by Russians and you know how Russians can be, show offs and all. They will say anything to make themselves, you know...look bigger. Like our friends say, "Fake it, until

you make it.” They will make some fake stuff to make themselves look better.

They fake a lot of stuff about themselves.

Expert also made a negative comment about VK. She was concerned with the lack of VK users’ communication etiquette, particularly expectations for communication. She commented, “As soon as you post something (on VK), you make yourself visible and everybody expects you to be available for communication,” because if someone is seen online, others expect him or her to like their posts or respond to their messages.

Philosopher did not offer criticism, but emphasized that although all Russian students used VK for social interactions, “for the goal of learning more about higher education abroad, one has to open a Facebook account. VKontakte is language-constricted and, as such, of course, is limited to the Russian users exclusively; obviously, its contributions are skewed.” However, Philosopher felt that if an American professor or a college advisor, or, even better, a professor or an advisor of Russian or any foreign origin, would register on VK, the posts and pages of this person would become quite popular because they would offer a variety of opinions.

It would be extraordinary having a chat with person like that or being able to exchange messages, um, e-mails in English. It is a very nice way of receiving information, but VK is very far from these routes of communication, it is too Russian, too tailored to the needs of the Russians in Russia, and it is sad, a pity.

Philosopher emphasized that Russians treated VK as something of their own, something that only Russians used; therefore, in his opinion, if a foreigner would join, it would attract attention and make people pay attention, even though it could be in broken Russian or in English. For example, Philosopher shared his experience with the Korean

Center. Philosopher was interested in Korean art and language. He was able to find a Korean Center in Moscow because some Koreans from that Center posted messages in VK in Russian. This was very unusual, was shared by several people, and attracted a lot of attention. When he joined the Center, he learned that this was intentional outreach tactic used by the Center.

Respondents' opinions about VKontakte. Summary. VKontakte was the most popular SNS among respondents. Ironically, it was praised and criticized for the same feature—all conversations are in Russian. Indeed, it is used predominantly by the Russian-speaking population, with the majority of posts written in Russian. On the one hand, it makes VK more attractive and easier for the Russian-speaking population to navigate. On the other hand, VK offers a more homogeneous array of opinions and suggestions. Based on respondents' opinions, the input of foreigners would reach a larger audience and enrich content.

Facebook. Reflecting upon their use of SNSs, it appeared that Facebook was as popular among respondents as VK. Eleven respondents made comments that having a FB account was almost as obligatory as having a VK account. Respondents stated that FB was beneficial, because of the versatile and multidimensional input from users of many countries. Polyglot stated, “The entire world is on Facebook. Join. Make friends with people from other countries. They know something that you don’t.” Polyglot also reported meeting psychology students from different countries after joining various interest groups on Facebook. Among these groups were “Russians in California” (“Русскоговорящие в Калифорнии”) and “Seeking Advice” (“Ищу совета”). She commented:

Each group has thousands of members... I posted a question... Something like [what] university would you recommend [to] study in California? Or “Any ideas for a muscovite who wants to study in California?,” something like that, and immediately got responses. People were very...ah...friendly. They wrote back. They said something like “It depends on what you want. Graduate or undergraduate? Send me a DM.” And we started talking. And one girl gave me her Viber number, and a guy sent me a Skype request, and they helped me a great deal. Many of them were not from USA. Like me. They really knew what I would need. It was like...like they knew better than I what I needed.

Musician shared a similar experience with Facebook: “There were more people on Facebook who knew things. [Who] had experience. Knew colleges and staff from all over the world. More drama [is] on Facebook.”

American emphasized that FB has a more heterogeneous population:

Vkontakte is for us [Russians]. Facebook is... Everyone is on Facebook. I mean, the older people, my age or older... Not kids. The kids, they are WhatsApp, Instagram, I don't know... But Facebook brings everyone in. I am in Russia, you [are] in U.S., another man [is] in Australia, we speak English; we are friends here. I write in Russian on Facebook, many people do, many who live outside [of] Russia, write in Russian and have Facebook accounts, but they bring different flavor, if you wish, to a conversation. They [are] more worldly.

Prodigy also offered a comment related to Facebook's functionality. He emphasized that the multinational population of FB encourages participants to use English as a common language and promotes the mastery of English, while the use of VK

prevents people from mastering English because they can write exclusively in Russian.

He commented:

People, in general, want it easy. Like why trouble yourself writing in English, if I can write in Russian. But for someone who is planning to study in the United States, it is important to know English. It is like my father says, “pragmatic, practical.” I guess I always try to make the most [out of things], maybe it’s not very smart, but writing in Russian, sitting on VKontakte hours after hours, it’s like, keeps you home.

Although Facebook was the second popular SNS among respondents, six respondents were passive users and five were active. Passive users admitted avoiding active Facebook engagement because they were uncomfortable writing in English, even though there were many Russian language users and groups on Facebook. They read other people’s posts and comments, but never posted anything themselves. They admitted being aware of the fact that this behavior limited their “friendships” and constricted access to information.

Respondents’ opinions about Facebook. Summary. Facebook was identified as the second most popular SNS. It was praised for the heterogeneous demographic composition of its users, which assured access to a greater variety of opinions and information from people from different parts of the world. At the same time, the necessity to write in English, even though there are Russian language groups and users who write in Russian, made respondents perceive FB as more challenging to use and, as such, less popular.

Instagram. Eight respondents reported using Instagram for their college search. They all agreed that Instagram offered an unprecedented visualization of places and events, including places and events on university campuses. Sponge Bob explained the power of Instagram by telling a story.

I know this dude; he posts [pictures of] New York. Every day he posts Instagram pictures from his office window. Every day. Same window. Like...sky and sun, and night, rain, people walking, corner store, dogs, clouds, like trees... It's amazing. I mean, pictures are phenomenal! No one would ever think it's the same corner. 78th, between Third and Lexington... That's Instagram for you!

Several respondents felt that Instagram's popularity, similar to VK's, is attributed to societal pressure. A comment by Optimist summarized these opinions: "Instagram is a very popular media. Everybody is there, because everybody likes pictures." Philosopher offered a more detailed explanation: "Instagram is popular, because it's simple. Just have your phone with you, take pictures, post them, and collect likes. Simple media for lazy simpletons."

The NH also agreed that Instagram's popularity can be attributed to its simple nature and to an opportunity, as he said, to "Photoshop life" and make people feel good about themselves.

Instagram is the easiest [SNS]... For lazy. You take a picture on your iPhone or Android, Photoshop it, and [it is] there immediately. If you feel like it, you write a few words or you don't. All pictures are beautiful, because... Photoshop, you see, it does the job. It is always beautiful. Your life is great. Your friends are great. You visit great places. Everyone envies you. You are the coolest.

Four participants—American, Bride, Expert, and Novice—liked Instagram because they did not have to write anything there—uploading pictures was enough. The language barrier theme persisted throughout conversations with Bride, Expert, Novice, and Philosopher.

Reflecting upon their use of Instagram, respondents also mentioned that, although they enjoyed it, they found its focus on pictures to be restrictive. Polyglot stated:

No links, you know, you can't post links [on Instagram]. Very short descriptions or no description, lots of commercial marketing... You want to have it, I mean, an Instagram account, and you want to brag, "I have 400 followers, I have one 1,400 followers," but its pictures. I mean, all it is [are] pictures. It's great, but it's stupid.

Respondents' opinions about Instagram. Summary. Instagram's popularity was rooted in its simplistic nature, its ability to make users' lives look more appealing, and in the help it provided for visualizing things. Opportunities to post in Russian or to avoid writing anything were also viewed as positive features. At the same time, Instagram's focus on pictures and the inability of participants to post and share links were viewed as its limitations.

Twitter, Blogs, LinkedIn, YouTube, and others. Seven respondents—American, Expert, Newlyweds, Polyglot, Philosopher, Prodigy, and Sponge Bob—read blogs as part of their college search activities. Only Sponge Bob reported running an active blog, but all others enjoyed reading other people's blogs, both in Russian and in English. The blogs were praised for being educational and entertaining; they were also described as sources which present the most eclectic and unpredictable information from the

perspectives of very different people. Particular praise was given to how detailed, visual, and specific blogs can be. American summarized the common opinions regarding blogs:

You can always find a blog written in Russian or in language you know. [There are] blogs about everything. They write theme blogs, like travel blog, auto blog, politics, education... They [author] may be biased, but they give you [info] from an average [person] viewpoint. Many bloggers [are] true experts. Day by day they write about what they have passion [for]. [They are] passionate and knowledgeable. They want to monetize their passion and it's like...like in that advertisement. Priceless!

The same group of respondents, excluding Philosopher, had Twitter accounts. Twitter was positively noted as a quick way to stay connected to world news, to access links to full length articles, and to utilize hashtags that offered quick search options. With the exception of Newlyweds, respondents admitted finding the 140 character limit to be restrictive, making Twitter less attractive for anything serious except simple news. They also did not like that they had to go to different sites, such as <http://t.co> and similar, to shorten their weblinks⁹. Expert gave a more detailed overview of Twitter features:

Twitter is probably my second favorite, but I only use it passively. I like it because it gives me information from different perspectives. It depends on who I follow; I try to follow different people. For example, in some of the forums I read comments of people who despise metropolitan Museum. If they have a Twitter account I try to follow them, but I also follow Twitter account of the metropolitan museum and of some fan of this museum. I mean the museum Twitter, you

⁹ Twitter posts have 140 character limits. In order to fit long weblinks into Twitter format, users can shorten them using t.co and similar services. The t.co service shortens URL of any length to 23 characters.

understand, right? It is like seeing the same thing from totally opposite, like enemies, like almost...antagonist, right...points of view! You see what I mean. I am myself, isn't that smart [*sic*] to post on Twitter and that is why I am a passive user. You know, newspapers often post Twitter mini-blogs because they are short and don't need interpretation.

Only Newlyweds were members and users of LinkedIn. They praised it for providing unique information about employment opportunities after graduation—a very important feature they could not find in other SNSs.

Four of the respondents reported watching YouTube. None of them had a personal channel or ever posted anything on YouTube, but all watched movies, video clips, and “how to” manuals. Expert commented that “everything you want is on YouTube. Lectures, presentations, everything, in any language you want.” The other three respondents also recognized the large volume of video resources available on YouTube.

Expert gave an overview of another SNS, Diary.ru:

Diary.ru is not Diary.com, it is a Russian language SNS and the diaries there are closer to our realities. I read the “ru.” Tumblr is more like a Live Journal, like an easy personal blog with pictures. On Tumblr, there are opportunities to post your own mini blog, repost other people posts or blogs, post links, pictures. It is not easy to navigate like VK. I had to ask my friend to teach me how to navigate [it].

Respondents' opinions about Twitter, Blogs, LinkedIn, YouTube, and others.

Summary. These less popular SNSs were praised for the same features as the more popular SNSs: utility or ease of use, visualization of content, versatility of opinions, and

timeliness. Their limited popularity was attributed to the fact that they serve more specialized and smaller audiences and that some of their features are harder to navigate.

RQ#1. Summary of results. Respondents named VKontakte, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LiveJournal blogs as most popular SNSs. There was no unanimity in opinions about the reasons for their popularity. Characteristics that some users enjoyed, other respondents found to be constricting and limiting. However, there was one feature—language—that seemed to be the major determining factor in which SNS respondents were most likely to use. Respondents preferred SNSs in which they could write and communicate in Russian as it was more convenient. Convenience offered through language proficiency also channeled respondents' passive or active use of the content: Proficiency in Russian made it is easier for them to actively search for information, ask questions, and participate in discussions. Respondents also seemed to prefer SNSs populated by people from Russia; this not only made it easier for them to communicate and exchange information, but also provided common ground for analyzing and understanding the content. Other positive characteristics of SNSs, as perceived by study participants, included ease of navigation and ability to visualize content (Instagram, YouTube), a large spectrum of opinions provided (Facebook, blogs, Twitter), quick reply time (VK, Facebook, Twitter), and the vast variety of informational resources available on all of the SNSs.

When speaking about SNS limitations, respondents seemed to be cognizant of the fact that strictly Russian language SNSs, such as VK, had a more homogeneous membership and, as such, provided rather limited content. Participants reported having and seeking membership in SNSs with a more global membership, such as Facebook or

Twitter, because these SNSs could assist them in obtaining more multidimensional information. Difficulties in navigating content or the need for a learning curve to master a SNS's features seemed to surpass the benefits a SNS could offer and instead made it less appealing, as was the case with LinkedIn. Another feature that was perceived as negative was some SNSs' focus on writing, such as, for instance, with blogs or Quora. These SNSs were viewed as too demanding and time consuming. Finally, respondents noted that some SNSs aimed their content at specific population groups, based on people's interests (DeviantArt) or age (AskBook); they found this approach to be limiting and thought that this narrow focus could diminish a SNS's popularity and membership base.

RQ#2. What type of information on SNSs is being used by RSUH students for their college choice activities? The answer to this research question is structured around four major themes—place, prestige, promotion, price—as they are used in students' college choice activities. Each theme is presented through students' detailed accounts in order to recognize the patterns of information and materials that international students are looking for on different SNSs. The conclusion will summarize these patterns and opinions.

RQ#2. Theme 1. Place. Better to see once than to hear a hundred times (Russian proverb). One of the most common reasons why respondents used SNSs was for the opportunity to learn as much as possible about an unknown place. Pictures and videos offered by social media seemed to help in dissipating fears and discomfort associated with the unknown, such as student lives at the HEIs abroad. For instance, Philosopher shared:

I loathe being out of place. To be in awkward position. Nothing is more humiliating than being treated as weird and strange alien. Instagram is... Surreptitiously tells you what to do. You simply look at pictures of people and, if you are attentive, you will see what [to] wear for different occasions, where they eat, what they eat... They wear sandals or...flip flops and shorts in winter. I am glad I saw this, [I] don't want them to think: "Oh, look at this Russian idiot in his fur coat!"

American was of a similar opinion:

It's obvious. If I saw pictures of certain places, if I knew people who posted [these pictures].. I talked to them on VKontakte or Facebook, something... I'm more comfortable with [my] choice, because I am already familiar with these surroundings. It's human psychology. Humans gravitate to familiar... It's like the Russian proverb says, "It's better to see once than to hear a hundred times."

Musician, Expert, and Polyglot admitted that visual effects on SNSs, such as pictures and videos, made them excited and less apprehensive about their decision to study abroad. Expert stated:

They [students] post [their] lives on Instagram. Here [she makes a few clicks on the phone and shows me a short video]. A few seconds, it's, you know, how long these [videos] are.... Here, see, students go to a football game. They [students] walk. You see...their faces, they chant, they have these same sweaters [sweatshirt]. I see they smile, and they crazy, funny... I feel ... You know... The energy. And I like ... I want it, too. It's, like, cool, students, friendship, real life, like real cool.

Polyglot also explained how Instagram helped her to visualize life on campus and to feel excited about her upcoming move:

There is this one girl and she posts pictures of herself on a bike. She is like in a bike club, I mean, bicycle not motor. She posts a picture or two every day. She bikes to work, she works in Starbucks. She is on bike winter, summer. It's California, so it doesn't matter. All her pictures are beautiful. What she wears, the gear, you know, it's perfect! She puts a chain around it and locks it, and there are many other bikes. I feel like I know her. I know her campus, every corner of [this] university.

Sponge Bob chose his future apartment by communicating with his friends in New York via VKontakte and reviewing pictures of apartments they posted there or sent through another SNS.

Prodigy's parents searched different SNSs for information about each campus in which they were interested. They got in contact with other members and asked questions about campus safety, requirements for transferring, living conditions, and opportunities for room and board outside of campus, perhaps with a Russian family. They met several people on Twitter, and Prodigy, after being admitted, will probably rent a room in one of their houses.

Novice reported that per the advice of the counselor from the education agency, he and his father started following the SNS pages of Seattle Central Community College. They joined the college's FB, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr, and YouTube channel, and through these sites, Novice learned "how this college looks like, how students look like."

Through some comments, he also acquired information about life expenses and learned that he had to work with college advisors to construct his class schedule.

RQ#2. Theme 2. Prestige. While discussing HEIs' images, all nine respondents showed awareness that some universities were better and more well known than others. They also expressed an interest in going to "better" universities, but their overall knowledge about HEIs abroad was very limited. Three respondents—Sponge Bob, Newlywed Husband, and Prodigy—made references to the U.S. World and News Report, but did not identify this report as a source of information for rating HEIs. The remaining nine respondents were not aware of any ranking or rating systems as they applied to HEIs. However, respondents shared stories in which they used SNS features for creating their own rating system. For example, American stated that the number of followers and likes could be indicative of an HEI's standing and popularity; for him and for many of his peers, these indirect measures determined an HEI's prestige. To illustrate, he stated that Harvard's Facebook account had millions of likes and then suggested comparing it to any other HEI's Facebook account. He asked me about schools in Indiana and instantly looked on his laptop at the general Facebook accounts of Harvard University, Indiana University, and Purdue University. Harvard's Facebook account had 3.3 million likes, Indiana University's (IU) had 260,000 likes, and Purdue's had 164,000 likes. American stated that these figures were very telling and important to him. He also emphasized that the difference in likes was particularly striking because the size of the student body at Harvard was lower than that of IU or Purdue. It was an important feature that highlighted the high standing of Harvard. American also mentioned that in the absence of any other information about IU and Purdue, for him the difference in likes would be indicative of

IU's higher standing as compared to Purdue. "It may be superficial, but it is also easy. If so many people want to follow your university's account, it must be a good university, right?" American named the ratio of followers and following as other criteria for rating an HEI.

Expert provided an explanation of how this measure was used. She mentioned that if an HEI's SNS account had substantially more followers than people they followed, it was a good indicator of this institution's popularity and recognition. She asserted that almost everyone, at least subconsciously, looked at these numbers on every SNS—Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest. As for Facebook, which has no following option, the number of likes is as important as the number of followers.

Newlyweds had their own criteria for measuring the prestige of a university—the ability of international graduates to find good jobs after graduation. Because this information is not available on college websites and social media sites, Newlyweds created their own system for finding this data with the help of SNSs. First, they would identify whether or not a university had a LinkedIn group. Second, they would try to join the group or, if possible, check its members to see where (i.e., companies, firms) the alumnae worked. Third, they would try to discover if there were any graduates of foreign origin. The third step was the most difficult. It was sometimes possible for them to identify the foreign origin of alumnae by alumnae last names, and sometimes the alumnae profile would list the country of origin, which would provide a straightforward answer. As NH stated:

The more foreigners you see, the better. Chinese or, I don't know, from Bangladesh or something... For me, it means that people who went to this

university find jobs, often in US. It is a great way to, eh, evaluate, where the opportunities for foreigners are better, I mean in what college. As Russian proverb says, “The paupers must be inventive.”

A somewhat similar tactic was also used by American. He was the only respondent who reported listening to or watching different TED podcasts. He stated that he subconsciously paid attention to the universities the TED speakers had attended. “These must be good universities. These people are so smart. They are very successful, because they are on TED.”

Musician mentioned that information about alumnae achievements that he was able to find on Facebook groups and LinkedIn pages was one factor that influenced his decision to apply to University of Miami. Expert did not have a specific rating system, but explained what a “good” university meant to her:

When I search universities, I am interested in [learning about the] future. For example, I would love to see a video where they talk about different salaries after obtaining your diploma. I want to hear students say, I got this job and it pay[s] this [much]. This is VERY, VERY important. You can understand it. Why people would leave the countries where they know everything?! So, for foreign students it is really, really important to know what majors, what specialties would give the better life after they finish. What university is better for this... Like obtaining good jobs. That is the information I looking [for]. Maybe it’s too practical, but good jobs and better life [are] two things people want. That is what important for me about universities.

Sponge Bob shared that several readers of his blog asked him to write specifically about universities in the United States. The majority of these requests came from his Russian readership, but there were also requests from Poland, Ukraine, and Belorussia.

You see, universities in the States are complicated. And everyone knows about Harvard. It's like, I went to Harvard. I will go to Harvard. It's ridiculous. How many undergraduates from Russia are in Harvard? So, people understand that there are other schools, like good schools and not so good schools, but how do they know? I mean, how people in Russia find it out, what schools are good and what are not so great. So, one day I am getting this comment. *Мне очень нравится Ваш блог. Я хочу поехать учиться в США, но ничего не знаю. Не могли бы вы написать об американских университетах.* Something, like, “I love your blog. I would like to study in the USA, but know nothing about it. Would you consider writing a blog about American universities?” For a moment I was like... Here is the business! But, there is always a “but.” I don't know much [about it] myself. I know, there are SYNI, CYNI, Ivy League, stuff in New York. One day I will. Someone has to. I can assure you it's a good business for someone who knows this business.

RQ#2. Theme 3. Promotion.

Promotion by friends and family. Don't have a hundred rubles, but a hundred friends (Russia proverb). Based on respondents' responses, activities on SNSs connected them with many people who they did not know previously and who they would never have had an opportunity to know, due to geographic distances and other factors of similar origin. These SNS “friends”—a social media term for people with

whom one communicates—became real friends who were interested in sharing their knowledge with respondents, and in helping and supporting them. Respondents admitted that these friends' posts made them excited about their choices and confirmed their decisions. Musician stated:

I'm friends [on SNS] with people from different universities. It's like, dude, here, the clubs, the bars, here is...selfie with cool girls. Here...video at the concert, the crowd... It's my campus... And it's like, I love it! I mean, what I hear and see. I'd like to be part of that life!

American shared:

I feel like I know my [VKontakte, Instagram, or Facebook] friends good. They post so much of their lives. [They] post locations. Pictures of what they do and they say a little, eh...you know, something about what they did. It's soon, like...I've been here with them. I see myself here.

The respondents also compared visual and written information provided by SNSs and by HEI websites and found SNS posts and comments to be more genuine and up to date. Philosopher commented:

Have you ever taken a scrupulous look at websites? Don't you find them sterile? Beautiful places, beautiful faces, beautiful snowy smiles. Vacated of any traces of reality. Reality is different. I don't anticipate social media affecting my choice [of HEI], but I would much rather attend a university I'm familiar with through people and not through inanimate booklets and Photoshopped website pictures.

Philosopher underlined that SNS communities helped him to find “a plethora of unmeasurably useful information.” He also felt that the two most attractive features of

SNSs were the informal nature of opinions and the variety of opinions. Expert made a similar comment:

People can be found on FB, or Google+, Twitter, LiveJournal, or VK at any time of the day. Someone is always there and this person can be in Canberra, or Washington, DC, or Rome, or, I don't know... They share links... I don't know... Post statuses and comments, and they argue, some follow and unfollow... It's an exciting life on its own.

According to Philosopher, the opinions of SNS communities allowed him to learn about the realities of everyday life that were not available through campus official media and sites, but that were really important to him. He did not refer to his SNS contacts as friends, but as sources of information that helped him to feel more comfortable with "the unknown."

There are many posts and stories where people share their sagas of conquering the West. For instance, what they did first when they arrived, what they did second, where they obtained furniture, and apparently it is always used furniture, how they adjusted to food, what were the best ways of finding jobs on campus, how much money one needed to survive on a very tight budget, what one had to do to flourish academically, how difficult the courses were, what were the professors' expectations, or even where on campus one could get free pizza. The official sites of universities will probably have no such posts, but SNS would provide exactly this type of posts, because the messages and the discussions are written by average people about their everyday lives. Do you see what I mean? Not clean pictures, but messy pictures, messy daily life. Small nuances are [as] important as

big details, such as the cost of concert tickets, what food is available in cafeteria, how easy or hard it i[s] to make friends, how accepting professors are of foreigners and of foreign accents. At what institutions students are most stressed, where the competition is unbearable, and where students are the most comfortable. All of it is crucial, because it is a VERY expensive and a VERY risky adventure, if I can call it an adventure. It is a HUGE family sacrifice and a HUGE financial burden. It is also hard emotionally to leave your family, and your country, and everything you know, and sail into unknown.

Polyglot felt that the friends she found through SNSs were as good, if not better, than her real-life friends. They were more generous, less vulnerable, more knowledgeable, and more available. There was also “less drama” and more control; she could “check out and turn it off” when she wanted. In addition, American and Polyglot commented that SNSs helped them to find good friends in the US who were even willing to host them when they first arrived.

Prodigy connected through Twitter and FB with Russian, American, and foreign students who studied at MIT, Columbia, and Princeton. He found Harvard students to be less approachable. Informal conversations with students helped him to receive answers to questions that were important to him, primarily related to topics such as academic standards, academic rigor, libraries, internships, research projects, and opportunities to do research as part of the curriculum. He was also able to view differences between students’ attitudes toward academic and social life. “I read people’s comments. Their posts. I saw what they were posting. And I knew, here I would, how you say it, fit in, and here I will not.” Prodigy and his parents felt that advice they obtained from SNS

community was less biased, less commercial, and, as a result, more trustworthy and accurate.

Promotion by the virtual community. One head is good, but two heads are better (Russian proverb). Several respondents told stories of how other SNS members' opinions led them to their majors. Musician shared a story of how he posted one question on his VK wall which yielded answers that unexpectedly pointed him in a very unexpected and welcomed direction.

I just posted a question on my own wall. That's all. A simple question in Russian, like "Hey, I am going abroad to study. Can anyone suggest how I can study music and business together?" My parents worry. *Кто-нибудь, ах! Еду учить в Америку. Посоветуйте, как соединить музыку и бизнес. Родки уже мозг вынесли, только бизнес, только бизнес.* And some random Russian guy who lives in the States read it and wrote me back, "Hey, try entertainment management. It's kind of cool." Something like that. And I am like "What?" Entertainments what? Management what?! Crazy, right! How cool is this?! No other random person would not even know what I was saying.

After deciding on the major, Musician began searching for an HEI that would offer such a major. He said that his first step included a Google inquiry which resulted in a long list of universities. The program at the University of Miami caught Musician's attention instantly, as he had visited Miami many times before and loved it. In addition, his family knew many other Russian families there. He discovered the same program at Florida Southern University, but decided against it. First, "it wasn't Miami," and second, the website and SNS of FSU did not give him a positive feeling: "Instagram was too

heavily [*sic*] with sport pictures and Vimeo was just bland, just blah, blah, bleak.” In contrast, he liked that the University of Miami website had a link to social media resources tailored to students of Music and Entertainment Program, including a Facebook page and a LinkedIn group. Musician said that he could not join the LinkedIn group, as it was for students and alumnae only, but through group members, he found other appropriate groups. The Facebook page served as a gateway to many events. The website talked at length about students’ achievements. According to Musician, these three factors shaped his decision to attend the University of Miami. First, it was located in a city with which he was familiar and where he knew people. Second, he appreciated the very informative website with many happy faces and links to resources. Finally, the “prestige” factor appealed to him, that is, information about alumnae achievements. Musician expressed his admiration toward SNSs several times and stated that “nothing would be possible, if not for VKontakte,” where he made his initial post. The recommendation he received there directed his search for a major; websites helped him in selecting an HEI.

Newlyweds reported searching Facebook for groups of international students or Russian students who were studying in the US. After joining these groups, they asked group members questions. Sometimes they would receive a couple of answers; sometimes there were long discussions with many people participating. Through these discussions and comments, Newlyweds were able to learn about career service centers and what they do, and about Optional Practical Trainings and visa extensions. To date, they have applied to the University of Illinois, University of Southern Illinois, and Iowa State University; NH visited these three schools while going on college visits with his

American host families. Although his choice was heavily influenced by his American parents, he felt that the advice of social media friends and searches on LinkedIn helped him to solidify his decision.

Polyglot also shared her story about finding a major through SNSs. With the help of SNSs, Polyglot became friends with some psychology students from different countries. In some cases, it was simply a coincidence: She was not intentionally searching for them, but found out about their majors by communicating with them in different groups. She also joined specific interest groups on VKontakte and Facebook—for instance, a group for those who are planning to study abroad or for Russian students who study abroad. These people’s descriptions of their majors piqued her interest and encouraged her to learn more about their majors. She will major in psychology after transferring, even though her current major is business related.

Prodigy knew what university he wanted to attend: He was interested in Ivy League schools and had known about these schools for quite some time from sources other than social media. However, his challenge was to find “the strongest program to combine languages and math.” He appealed to SNSs because through social media he thought to contact professors at these universities and to hear directly from them about potential majors. He and his father developed a system for doing this. They searched for professors of Russian descent who were working and living in the US. They specifically searched for professors from the former Soviet Union Republics (FSUR) because they shared common values and there were no language or culture barriers. Through Twitter, Facebook, and emails, Prodigy and his father established lines of direct communication with several professors of Russian descent from Ivy League schools seeking their advice

on programs of study. Sometimes they would find these professors on the university's website and e-mail them, but more often they would refrain from sending e-mails and would instead become friends on Facebook and send a direct message.

It may sound difficult, but it's not. People are often more happy when someone writes them in Russian and sends them a friend request on Facebook, because they can check you on Facebook, and see who you are; I mean what you post, what your interests, your pictures... You know what I mean. Your profile. After [that], they are more likely to talk to you, and answer your questions, and not just wave you, eh...I guess, you say [wave you] away, right...you know, like a fly.

Following recommendations from faculty members at FSUR, Prodigy was leaning toward computation linguistics or applied math because these majors would allow him to combine his passion for languages with his interest in math. He felt that the department's web pages, although helpful, were not nearly as informative as personal stories and advice; without these informal contacts and conversations, he would still not know what to do. He is still not 100% sure about what program or college to choose, but is much more comfortable making this choice after talking to experts.

RQ#2. Theme 4. Price. Money isn't an issue, but its quantities (Russian proverb). There were seven respondents who reported searching university SNSs and websites for information about scholarships and financial aid. Prodigy felt that he could and should get an academic scholarship. He used colleges' official Facebook pages to inquire about scholarships, made two or three inquiries, and received one message that advised him to inquire at the specific departments. He was unable to find the correct information there; websites gave him "something very general, not worth spending time."

Prodigy's parents did not want him to invest time and effort into searching for scholarships; several times they told him that the money was not an issue and he reported that he knew it. However, he was still interested in scholarship because it was a sign of recognition of his worthiness, rather than "a mean to satisfy needs."

American stated that information about scholarships and financial aid was among his priorities. He searched for this information through different SNSs using the hashtags #scholarships, #scholarshipsusa, and #scholarshipsforforeigners. He also made inquiries in some FB and VK groups to which he belonged, but received no useful information. American's experience was unsatisfactory. He stated that some group members shared that they "just got monies from the departments" or stated something like "they look at your grades and give you money because that's what they do, if they want you there." American found these facts hard to believe and his aunt also told him that he should not expect this type of treatment, because these scholarships were "probably not for foreign students."

Newlyweds, per their American "parents" and SNS friends' recommendations, searched for opportunities to find work on campus as additional sources of financing their education and because student visas would allow them to work on campus. They learned that there were opportunities to find jobs or even to live in the dormitories free of charge. They conversed via WhatsApp with some students from Southern Illinois University whom they met through a SNS. They also connected with an adviser through the university's Facebook page and found her recommendations to be very helpful. Newlyweds made no attempt to search SNSs for information about grants and scholarships.

Finding information about funding was also a priority for Bride. She and her fiancé searched the ASU website for links to grants and scholarships, but found that there were almost no scholarships for international students, only links to other websites outside of the university. Bride did not know where else to search and it never occurred to her to search SNSs for this type of information. Her fiancé advised her to defer her admission to ASU for one year because, according to her fiancé, in a year she would qualify for in-state tuition, which was lower than if she would have started now.

Expert and Philosopher were in the very early stages of searching for this type of information, but both considered SNSs to be their primary sources of information, including financial information. Philosopher made some inquiries about the “real” cost of college, such as tuition and other expenses, and about some additional sources of funding. Expert planned to do the same, as she learned from her SNS friends that higher education in the US is very expensive.

RQ#2. Summary of results. The preponderance of the information, as it relates to answering Research Question #2—What type of information on SNSs is being used by RSUH students for their college choice activities?—suggests that respondents’ use of SNSs for college-seeking activities can be divided into four groups. First, respondents searched SNSs for advice about specific majors and universities. Second, respondents used SNSs to measure an HEI’s value. They did so by obtaining evidence of foreign graduates’ professional successes that was self-presented on the different SNSs. They also applied specific SNS criteria, such as number of likes, followers, and ratio of followers and following that different institutional SNSs enjoyed. Third, SNSs provided emotional benefits: Pictures, stories, and videos from various sites made respondents

feel less anxious about the unknown and more connected to the students who were currently studying at different HEIs abroad. This visualization also played a role in solidifying respondents' decisions. Fourth, respondents searched SNSs for information about financing their studies. Respondents' stories suggested that this was the area where SNSs offered minimal additional knowledge and benefits.

RQ#3. Were there any connections between type of information available on SNSs and RSUH students' choice of HEI abroad? For three respondents—Musician, Polyglot, and Prodigy—advice provided by members of various SNSs made a direct impact on their choice of HEI and major. All three identified themselves as heavy and active users of various SNSs; they actively sought out information by posting questions and participating in group discussions. Musician and Polyglot conversed exclusively with other students and Prodigy engaged in conversations with students and faculty.

There were three other respondents who had no connections abroad. As they were in the very early stages of their decision-making process, they were unable to discuss any specific results; however, they conveyed that without SNSs, they would not have even considered the possibility of transferring abroad because they would not have known where to start. The presence of SNSs granted them the opportunity to connect with people and start generating knowledge that could help them in the transferring process.

I was also able to connect with Expert. Expert stated that one year prior, she met a man through a Facebook group who was an American of Russian descent, and they became good friends. They met in Europe in person and he helped her to fill out an application and apply to the University of North Florida in Jacksonville and to

Jacksonville University, because he lived and worked there. She got accepted to a Jacksonville University and even received a small scholarship. She will begin studying there in September 2016 and will go to a community college in the summer to improve her English. The advisor from the community college told her that her credits would transfer. She confessed that nothing would be possible without SNSs; at the moment, she was researching social media for more information about the school, life on campus, jobs on campus, and the city of Jacksonville. The remaining eight respondents reported no direct connections between their choice of HEI abroad, their choice of major, and their use of SNSs. However, they emphasized indirect connections and the impact of SNSs on their decision-making process.

Chapter 4. Part 2. Conclusion

The answers to the three research questions are summarized in Table 3. The table highlights information about respondents' patterns in their use of SNSs, the type of information they were researching, and whether or not these searches resulted in finding an HEI abroad or identifying a particular major.

In describing their journey of using SNSs for transferring to a college abroad, each study participant had a different story. They came from varied majors and college standings and were in different stages of the transferring process. Some had relatives and friends abroad and were able to obtain college information from them. Others had previously visited the US or other countries of interest and had had a chance to visit different campuses. Some had never visited the US or other countries of interest; in addition, these respondents did not have friends and relatives abroad from whom they could obtain information about HEIs.

Some students reported that their parents actively helped them in their college choice activities, yet others had conducted their own research and made their college decisions independently. The majority of students revealed limited use of “official” materials, such as HEI websites, brochures, and College Fairs.

Participants also differed in their pattern of SNS use. First, all participants had at least one SNS account and the majority had several accounts. They reported having accounts on 12 different SNS; five platforms—VKontakte, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and blogs—were particularly popular. However, some respondents used their SNSs heavily and were almost physically attached to their phones, others were moderate users, and others hardly used SNSs at all. In addition, some participants described themselves as active SNS users, which meant that they made posts and shared pictures and information on their pages, actively participated in discussions, asked questions, and commented on other people’s posts. Other participants described themselves as passive SNS users, which meant that they read other people’s posts and discussions, but did not actively ask questions or write comments. They also hardly posted any information, aside from pictures, on their own pages. Students’ pattern of using SNS for college choice activities is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Use of SNS for College Choice

Use of Social Media for College Choice Activities							No use of SNS for College Choice
Respondent Name	Helped choosing College	Helped choosing Major	Place	Prestige	Promotion	Price	
Expert ¹⁰			X	X	X	X	
Philosopher			X	X	X	X	
Polyglot	X	X	X	X	X	X	
American ¹¹			X	X	X	X	
Musician		X	X	X	X	X	
Newlywed Husband			X	X	X	X	
Newlywed Wife			X	X	X	X	
Optimist							X
Prodigy		X	X	X	X	X	
Sponge Bob			X		X	X	
Bride ¹²							X
Novice							X

¹⁰ Yellow: heavy users of SNS¹¹ Green: moderate users of SNS¹² Purple: light users of SNS

Heavy and light SNS users, as well as active and passive SNS users, also differed in their SNS use for college choice activities. Heavy users were more likely to be active users as well and were less likely to have relatives or friends abroad guide their college choice decision-making process. As a result, they were more likely to rely almost exclusively on SNSs and invest time in these searches. They initiated searches for information by asking questions on various SNSs, joining different social media groups, using hashtags to direct their searches, reviewing numbers of likes and followers on HEI pages, and even creating their own unique strategies for finding helpful materials through SNSs. Three respondents—active and heavy SNS users—reported selecting their majors and colleges based on information obtained exclusively from different SNSs. The majority of active users shared that the SNS phenomenon presented them with an opportunity to learn about transferring to HEIs outside of the US; without SNSs, they would not even know that such a path was available.

Passive and light users exhibited different patterns in their use of SNSs for college choice activities in comparison with active and heavy users. First, all of them also reported having personal connections and affiliations abroad which were instrumental in guiding their decisions. Three respondents with personal connections abroad reported relying solely on the experiences and advice of their friends, relatives, and other connections. Among these three respondents was one individual who described himself as an active and heavy user of SNS, but even he relied solely on his personal experience abroad and the advice of his friends. Other passive users invested a limited amount of time into searching SNSs, rarely belonged to more than one SNS, and, as it pertains to

their college choice activities, primarily used SNSs to validate their choice of an HEI abroad and to learn more about the HEI of their choice after their decision was made.

Many factors were involved in international students' choice of college abroad. Respondents' stories and the themes which emerged from the data exemplified how international students used SNSs in their decision-making processes. The ideas and observations generated could impact future research, policy, and practice.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

Introduction

This final chapter includes three parts. The first part is a summary of the study, its goals, research questions, theoretical framework, methodology, and results. The second part is the discussion of findings. It is focused on each of the three research questions and, as such, consists of three subparts, with each subpart devoted to discussing one of the three research questions. Each subpart concludes with recommendations for future research and practice. The final part of Chapter 5 begins with discussing possible concerns and limitations. It concludes with a summary of implications drawn from the findings and a review of six major recommendations for policymakers, researchers, and HEI practitioners.

Part 1. Study Summary

Each year, an increasing number of international students choose to study overseas, bringing valuable intellectual, social, and financial contributions to campuses and causing competition among HEIs around the world. One of the newest strategies for connecting with international students is through the use of social networks. This trend has been gaining momentum and is being employed by colleges for four major reasons: proliferation of high speed Internet, decrease in the cost of broad-banding, rapid development of social media, and students' early adaptation to online forms of communication.

Understanding the social networking component of a foreign student's college decision-making process is an important step in helping policymakers and admissions professionals to increase HEIs' attractiveness to international students. This need

determined the goal of this study, which was to explore the social media and SNS experiences of undergraduate students from RSUH who were at different stages of transferring to various HEIs abroad. To meet this goal, this study aimed to answer the following supportive questions:

1. What SNSs did students of Russia State University for Humanities (RSUH) use for their college choice activities?
2. What type of information on SNSs is being used by RSUH students for their college choice activities?
3. Were there any connections between type of information available on SNSs and RSUH students' choice of HEI in the US?

The literature highlights five major areas, as they relate to an understanding of the research questions: (a) a history of SNSs and their connection to HEIs' recruitment of international students; (b) the impact of Internet availability, affordability, and speed on the increase in the number of SNS users across the globe, resulting in a larger share of international students in HEIs in the US; (c) a theoretical framework of international students' decision-making processes to seek educational opportunities abroad; (d) forces that shaped the mobility of students from Russia into HEIs in the United States; and (e) the trends in Russian students' use of SNSs.

This qualitative study took place at the Russia State University for Humanities in Moscow (RSUH) and was preceded by the pilot study—a step that helped to improve the sampling and data collection procedures. Participant selection was conducted through a questionnaire that aimed to identify students who were in different stages of making a decision regarding transferring to an HEI abroad, regardless of the country. Thirteen

students qualified for the study and 12 were able to complete their interviews. The data analysis procedure was informed by the work of Creswell (2002). Care was taken to ensure the integrity of data analysis through audio and video recording of all interviews to preserve the content and capture nonverbal communication and undertones through correspondence, member-checking, and authentication of content by study participants, and through discussion of biases with study participants in response to their questions and comments.

Participants reported having accounts across 12 different SNSs; among them, VKontakte, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LiveJournal blogs were identified as the most popular. Language (Russian), convenience, and ease of use seemed to be among the highest motivating factors for membership in a specific SNS. Among other SNS benefits, as perceived by the respondents, were members' geographic, social, and culture diversity; opportunities for instantaneous connections with individuals of similar interests and backgrounds; and unbiased and multidimensional views presented by SNS members. While asked what information related to higher education respondents were trying to find on SNS, they stated that they searched SNSs primarily for information about majors and universities, culture norms abroad, and cost of education. Respondents measured the worthiness of different HEIs and majors through traditional measures, such as opportunities after graduation, and searched SNSs for this type of information. They also applied SNS-specific criteria such as searching for the number of "likes" that HEI social network accounts enjoyed, the number of followers, and the ratio of followers to following. Respondents reported that SNSs provided emotional benefits by helping to visualize an unknown reality, develop social capital, and establish friendships. The least

amount of benefits derived from SNSs related to finding information about educational grants and other types of financial assistance, as SNSs offered very limited materials related to these inquiries.

One of the emerging study findings was that participants with no connections abroad relied exclusively on SNSs for their college choice decisions. This group of individuals acknowledged that without SNSs, they would have never known about the opportunity to transfer to an HEI abroad, as they had no channels for obtaining such information. These individuals represented a group of students who had never considered transferring or applying to study abroad in the past, but who were now able to due to the availability of information through SNSs. For participants with connections abroad, the advice of their international contacts, friends, and relatives played a major role in their college choice and SNSs played a supportive role.

Part 2. Discussion

Subpart 1. Research Question #1. What SNSs did students of Russia State University for Humanities (RSUH) use for their college choice activities? In the context of this research question, the SNS usage reported by RSUH students is similar to 2013 findings by the EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research (ECAR; Dahlstrom, Walker, & Dziuban, 2013) and the 2014 National Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology (Dahlstrom & Bichsell, 2014). Among SNS sites referenced by the ECAR were Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn. These findings were also similar to findings described by Saw, Abbott, and Donaghey (2013). These authors reported that Facebook and Twitter were the most popular SNSs among international students. These two sites were followed by YouTube, LinkedIn, and

Google+, a prioritization which is similar to this study's findings. Saw et al. (2013) also described international students' patterns of using SNSs. Their findings revealed that all study participants who were of Chinese origin belonged to the Chinese SNS Renren, similar to this study's participants' membership in the Russian SNS VKontakte.

Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim, and LaRose's (2012) study of international students at a large Midwestern university demonstrated that 71 out of 195 study participants "indicated Facebook as their primary SNS and 60 participants indicated other SNSs as their primary SNS, which include Orkut, Friendster, Xiaonei, Cyworld, QQ, Wretch and Mixi" (p. 429). It is important to note that at the time the article was written, Orkut¹³ was a very popular SNS in both India and Brazil, with the majority of users being from these two countries. Xiaonei¹⁴ was a popular Chinese SNS, Cyworld¹⁵ was a top South Korean SNS, Mixi¹⁶ was a top Japanese SNS, and Wretch¹⁷ was the largest SNS in Taiwan. On one hand, the Lin et al. (2012) findings, as they relate to international students' membership in the SNS specific to their country of origin, were also similar to the findings of this study which demonstrate the prevalence of the Russian students' membership in the Russian SNS VKontakte. At the same time, it seemed as if local SNSs often lose ground to the social media giants, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, which, as was discovered in the current study, directs participants toward these global SNSs.

¹³ Google closed Orkut in 2014.

¹⁴ Xiaonei recently morphed into Renren.

¹⁵ Cyworld decided to close on February 10, 2014 due to failing to compete against global SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

¹⁶ Mixi Lost its popularity in Japan as SNS around 2013 and morphed into gaming platform.

¹⁷ Yahoo closed Wretch in 2013.

Subpart 1. Research Question #1. Recommendations.

Future research. The above finding may serve as an indication that future research should focus on learning how international students use global SNS giants—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so forth—which dominate the social media market today. Local SNSs, while operational, also enjoy a large local membership. This fact warrants researching how international students make use of their local SNS in their college choice activities. It is important to recognize that there is a dearth of literature which describes specific features of different SNSs and explains what makes them attractive to international students.

In addition, there is a dearth of literature that provides information on how different features of SNSs are being applied by international students in their college choice activities. The results of the interviews shed light on the benefits of different SNS features as perceived by students in relationship to their college choice activities. I am interested in researching further the value of different SNS features in connection to college choice in order to add to the literature. In particular, it would be beneficial to learn what type of global SNS features students from different countries find most useful in making their college choice decision. The research could help to identify whether there are country-related differences and similarities. It could also translate into practice by directing admissions and marketing offices in their efforts .

Practical implications. For practitioners, fluency in local and global SNSs can be a useful tool for reaching out to international students because, while operational, these SNSs enjoy a very large membership. In order to assure optimal and efficient use of local and global SNSs, administration of HEI admissions offices can enhance their appeal

to international students by hiring them to maintain consistent content on country-specific SNSs like VKontakte and Renren; this step would also allow admissions offices to maintain content in the students' native language. In addition, international or domestic students can be employed to generate content on other SNS pages of their choice, providing they demonstrate fluency and proficiency in these particular SNSs and their features. These students should be trained and educated to discuss different majors, application requirements, financial issues, living conditions, and other topics in which international students seem to be interested.

Subpart 2. Research Question #2. What type of information on SNSs is being used by RSUH students for their college choice activities?

Price.

Cost of education abroad. The price international students pay for studying at an HEI abroad and its influence on international students' college choice has been discussed over the years by many researchers (Kamal Basha, Sweeney, & Soutar, 2016; Lei & Chuang, 2010; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Sia, 2010; Singh, 2016). The respondents of this study also reported searching for information related to financing their education and the cost of living abroad. This behavior is similar to findings reported in studies already cited. However, the current study determined that, while various SNSs provided a plethora of information about the cost of education, cost of living, and other expenses, respondents were unable to obtain additional knowledge about scholarships and financial aid. Some of the respondents also reported researching HEIs' websites; they also admitted being disappointed to learn that the emphasis was on self-funding.

As they discussed the cost of education, two of the study participants mentioned the advice they received from family and friends. The advice helped them to select less financially burdensome options. The Bride's American fiancé recommended that she postpone starting her education in the US until she obtained residency status which would reduce her tuition. Novice received recommendations from his family friends to begin at a community college, because it was a less expensive option, and then transfer to a four-year institution. None of the respondents mentioned that these types of suggestions were offered through SNSs.

While the cost of studying outside of Russia was widely discussed by the study participants, it is interesting to note that none of the respondents shared that the cost would preclude them from transferring to an HEI abroad. There was no direct evidence that they were "shopping" for an HEI with a lower tuition cost or searching SNSs for these data. Perhaps they were unaware that different HEIs may have different tuition rates. Or, perhaps they were from more affluent families, as several participants mentioned the financial support they planned to receive from their families. However, there were several participants who mentioned the brunt of financial sacrifices their families were willing to make for them. It seems like future research about variations in the financial backgrounds of families could be useful for understanding international students' decision-making processes as they relate to transferring to HEI abroad. It could also be coupled with learning more about international transfer students' attitudes toward the cost of education abroad.

Cost and changing political climate. During the interviews, several respondents indicated that they had to disregard concerns associated with financing their education

abroad because political changes in Russia made them look for educational opportunities outside of Russia sooner than they had anticipated. This evidence, although not actively sought or anticipated, contributed to the significance of the “push-pull” theoretical model. The model identifies political instabilities and pessimism about a home country’s political and economic futures as substantial “push” factors for international students’ considerations to study abroad (Chen, 2008; Lee, 1996; Lee et al., 2006; Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992). The respondents’ stories confirmed the utility of the push-pull model. Several respondents made direct inferences to how the changing political climate in Russia had compelled them to start looking for educational opportunities abroad sooner than they had originally planned. One of the participants stated that he wanted to leave Russia before the country is “sealed.” Another participant shared that because of the changing political environment, he changed his plan to travel abroad for a graduate degree to leaving Russia earlier and finishing his undergraduate education in the US. He did so despite learning from his relatives that he would have had a better chance of obtaining institutional support for financing his graduate studies than he would for his undergraduate education. He said that he wanted to leave “before any blood spills.”

Approximately 13 months ago, three students asked me to destroy their interviews in fear of repercussions for seeking to finish their education abroad. They were also afraid that, if their thoughts and feelings were discovered, they could be precluded from leaving Russia. Overall, three study participants who were planning to receive their undergraduate degrees in Russia and obtain graduate degree abroad, because it could have been a better choice financially, revealed that they had changed their plans due to

“push” factors within the country. It seemed as if “push” factors played a larger role in study participants’ decision to move to a different country to continue their higher education than the cost of higher education abroad.

Value for money. Employment opportunities after graduation. Employment prospects after graduation—value for money—are among the factors that have been known to shape international students’ choice of what institution to attend while studying overseas (Bodycott, 2009; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010). The literature shows that many international students do as much as they can to find jobs in the US after graduating from college. “Approximately 90% of immigrant visa beneficiaries for employment purposes already live in the U.S., and most are international students on Optional Practical Training (OPT) or H01B visas” (Banjong & Olson, 2016, p. 8). Participants of this study demonstrated similar motivations, as they were also looking for career-related information. Based on their responses, study participants seemed to rely exclusively on SNSs because they considered the opinions of SNS members more “real” and objective. Respondents did not report relying on data presented on the HEI websites, which reflected their skepticism to everything “official,” that is, information generated through more structured or government-sponsored channels, which seems to be a rather typical attitude of people from countries plagued by state corruption. Three participants—Newlyweds and American—created a system for extracting information from SNSs to obtain a more objective picture about the employment opportunities of international graduates of different HEIs. For American, it was a rather simple approach: While listening to TED podcasts, he took note of the HEIs from which the presenters graduated. For Newlyweds, it was a chain of deliberate efforts

aimed at researching LinkedIn for jobs international students are able to obtain after graduating from specific HEIs in the US. They described the data they were able to extract from LinkedIn to be of a high value to them, because it was current and “real, not for show.”

Future research efforts should be focused on investigating SNS search strategies that international students create for identifying and collecting information related to employment after graduation. Practitioners at HEIs could apply these strategies in building SNS content and increasing institutional attractiveness.

Prestige. Previous literature suggests that the selectivity of an HEI and its reputation, as perceived through various systems of ranking and rating, impact international students’ choice of a specific HEI abroad (Clark, 2007; Lu et al., 2009; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Morgan, 2010; Williams, 2008). However, this was not the case in this study. First of all, while study participants were aware of some world-renowned HEIs, such as Harvard or Stanford, their overall self-reported general knowledge of HEI rankings and ratings was, nonetheless, very limited. Only three study participants stated that they were aware of the U.S. World and News Report, and only one—Prodigy—admitted knowing about and being interested in elite, higher-ranked universities. The interviews with other participants revealed no knowledge of or interest in the traditional institutional rankings and ratings provided by the U.S. World and News Report. However, they were not completely oblivious to the fact that HEIs had different levels of status and prestige—but instead of following the traditional system, respondents reported developing their own systems of rating and ranking that were heavily influenced by and reflective of the ratings and rankings criteria specific to different SNSs.

Respondents, particularly those with no connections abroad, searched for and took note of the numbers of “likes,” numbers of “followers,” and the ratios of “followers” to “following” the various SNSs of HEIs demonstrated. Interestingly enough, despite being aware of the SNS likes and followers, study participants reported not being particularly motivated or influenced by these numbers either. The ratios of followers to following, the numbers of likes, and other SNS popularity attributes were noted, but did not play a guiding role in their college choice decision-making process; rather, the recommendations and advice of relatives and friends took precedence over these factors.

The difference between the current study’s research findings and those presented in previous literature can be attributed to several factors. First, only three participants were even aware of the rating and ranking system provided by the U.S. World and News Report. The remaining nine respondents did not know of this source of information and seemed to be unaware of the institutional ranking and rating system, with the exception of three top institutions, namely Harvard, Stanford, and MIT. As a result, respondents did not use the U.S. News and World Report, but instead found a source of information in SNSs. Second, seven respondents had friends and relatives abroad who guided their choice of a higher education institution based on criteria of their own. Third, while respondents reported unfamiliarity with the traditional system of HEI rating and ranking, all respondents were very familiar with the SNS system of rating and ranking. It likely seemed logical to them to apply the already familiar system of ranking and rating to the HEIs. Finally, perhaps their indifferent attitude toward the traditional rating and ranking system can be attributed to the fact that all 12 respondents were transfer students and their decision-making process differed from that of traditional college applicants.

Overall, this is interesting evidence that emerged as the result of this study and it could be researched further. When Russian students' use of SNS rating and ranking is better understood, it could be employed by HEI practitioners to increase HEIs' visibility and attractiveness overall and to target students from Russia in particular.

Place.

Social norms and cultures on international campus. Another study finding reveals how international students use SNSs to learn about different social norms and cultures on international campuses and to build social ties with students on these campuses. With the help of SNSs, these steps can be taken prior to students leaving their home countries and arriving on campus. Previous literature depicts these types of activities through the theories of social capital and social network, that is, an international link that gives participants benefits derived from the relationships (Adler & Kwon, 2002). According to these theories, social networking exposes students to different social norms, allowing them to obtain useful information and foster relationships with other students (Coleman, 1988; Kisang, 2010; Portney & Berry, 1997), which creates a sense of belonging and offers social and emotional support (Gottlieb, 1981; Kisang, 2010; Stanton-Salazar & Pina, 2005). Recent studies have shown that online activities, such as membership in different SNSs, can increase the size and versatility of students' social networks (Chen, 2014a; Hampton & Ling, 2013), allowing them to obtain information from various sources and develop multiple connections before arriving on campus.

Several studies have focused on the use of Facebook by international students to build social networks and foster relationships (Johnston et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2013). There is some literature that describes the use of the Chinese SNS Renren

by Chinese students for social networking (Xiaoquan & Wenhong, 2014). However, little is known about how the use of SNSs in Russia is connected with the increase in Russian-speaking students who are transferring to HEIs abroad. One emerging finding of this study relates to how the use of all types of SNSs, including the local VKontakte, allows Russian-speaking students to develop social capital and social ties even before arriving on international campus. Through SNSs, respondents communicated with representatives of different campuses and different countries while they were still in Russia. They asked questions about culture, language, education systems, interpersonal relationships, fashion, food, and even attitudes abroad; they made these inquiries as often as they desired and without encountering any cost. Study participants also commented that they could contrast and compare opinions of their compatriots with information provided by other international students or by local students. The ability to obtain information in Russian was of particular importance to respondents who viewed their proficiency in English as limited. Some respondents reported using SNSs passively, mostly through reading other people's posts, while others actively posted questions, searched SNSs through hashtags, engaged in dialogue, and joined interest groups within SNSs. All of the respondents revealed that they were able to establish some form of social networking and build some social capital before arriving on campus abroad.

This information represents an important step in addressing limitations that afflict international students abroad, which, according to previous research, can lead to feelings of isolation and depression, thereby diminishing students' educational experiences and developmental opportunities (Huntley, 1993; Oropeza, Fitzgibbon, & Baron, 2011; Terzian & Osborne, 2011; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008; Zhao, Kuh, &

Carini, 2005). Meanwhile, the literature shows that those who connect with Americans often yield more positive outcomes (Zhao et al., 2005). Based on the responses of RSUH students, early interactions through SNSs seemed to reduce anxiety and helped students to develop connections with a variety of students, including American students, international students, and students from their own country, prior to arriving on campus.

In their study of Chinese students, Xiaoquan and Wenhong (2014) found that “the use of both the host country and home country SNSs, especially the host country SNS, is strongly related to bridging social capital but not related to bonding social capital in the US” (p. 121), due to those values that can only be obtained through face-to-face interactions. It would be interesting to conduct another study in order to learn about “bonding social capital” and Russian-speaking students’ behavioral adaptation after arriving on international HEI campuses. In addition, the rapid advancements in SNSs may offer yet other new forms of communications.

Every participant of this study reported searching SNSs for information that would expand their knowledge of culture, education, and behavioral norms abroad, as well as information related to finances and careers, as this knowledge could diminish their level of anxiety related to transferring to HEIs abroad. For students like Philosopher, who admitted finding traditional face-to-face interactions with HEI representatives and counselors to be discouraging, SNSs provided a less socially engaging form of obtaining information. The focus of this study was not on researching the association among international students’ personalities, their use of SNSs, and social well-being on international campuses, but is an interesting topic which could be addressed by future research.

Promotion.

Parental influence. The goal of this study was not to learn about the influence of parents and friends on the international transfer students' choice of an HEI abroad. However, the emerging findings of this study confirm earlier findings (IIE, 2004; Murphy, 2003) that highlighted the influence of parents on international students' decision-making process to study abroad and select an HEI. One of the respondents, Novice, had his parents make all of the decisions for him. Prodigy's father played both a collaborative and a guiding role for his son, and the parents of Musician indirectly guided his decision-making behavior. One of the Newlyweds had his "American family"—host parents from his time as a foreign exchange student—assist in his decision-making process. Newlyweds also spoke at length about their parents' support and the financial sacrifices they were willing to make, which was similar to the rest of the study participants who made indirect comments related to their parents supporting and financing their decision to study abroad. It seems that without a deep belief that their parents were fully behind their decision, respondents would not even embark on the journey of finishing their education abroad.

No friends. No problem. Two participants—Expert and Philosopher—had no personal connections abroad and no experience of previously travelling abroad. In the pre-SNS era, their exposure to international HEIs would be limited to College Fairs and contacts they would be able to establish through this channel. For students like Philosopher, who seemed to find interactions with other people challenging, it was a rather unwelcomed option. The presence of SNSs presented more opportunities for him and for students with similar attitudes. They could develop relationships with virtual

friends whom they “met” via SNSs and receive “promotional” advice from them. Moreover, while Expert took an active role in developing contacts and finding information about HEIs abroad, Philosopher was able to do so in a much more passive manner and still obtain the information he was seeking without leaving his comfort zone. In addition, the insights offered during interviews by Musician, Prodigy, and Polyglot—students who had an opportunity to travel abroad, but who had no personal connections abroad to guide their college choice activities—portrayed how SNS “friends” could play a guiding role. These “friends,” like real-life friends, answered various questions, described HEI policies, helped in making additional connections, provided referrals, and, overall, made conversations personal and targeted to a prospective student’s specific needs.

On the one hand, this finding is congruent with previous research that described the important “promotional” role family and friends play in international students’ college choice decision-making process. On the other hand, it assists in discovering a new population of international students who would not consider attending an HEI abroad, if not for the connections they were able to make with the help of SNSs. There seems to be a dearth of research related to the role virtual friends (i.e., friends who met exclusively through SNSs) play in international students’ college choice decisions, particularly among students with no direct connections abroad.

Subpart 2. Research Question #2. Recommendations.

Future research. The evidence mentioned in previous paragraphs can be helpful in shaping institutional efforts to attract international as well as domestic students. To strengthen this finding, more research on HEI alumnae groups on LinkedIn, Facebook,

and other SNS platforms should be done, followed by research on how international students approach and analyze the content of SNS groups in their search for information. This research can also assist in learning about the relationships between students' college choice activities and how they consider the career achievements of alumni.

Additional research can be conducted to learn how HEIs present financial information on the pages of different SNSs. Expanding this study to multiple institutions and different types of HEIs is worth pursuing. Although the results of this study did not indicate that cost is a significant factor in students' college choice activities, it would be beneficial to study this further.

Additional research is needed to continue learning about international students' attitudes toward HEI rankings and ratings. Future studies could further investigate the role of SNS ranking systems, as they pertain to HEIs, in international students' decision-making process. In the future, this research should be expanded to international students from different countries. It would be beneficial to investigate whether or not the behavior toward institutional ranking and rating displayed by the respondents of this study is specific to students from Russia, or if similar trends could be found among students from other countries. This research could help to produce a more informed comparison; in addition, analysis of international students' attitudes toward SNSs would be enhanced by better understanding the SNS behavior of international students when selecting an HEI abroad.

Finally, this study identified individuals whose very participation in the process of discovering opportunities to study abroad was linked exclusively to SNSs, because, in the pre social media era, these individuals would have had no access to such information.

Research related to identifying and studying these individuals is necessary to assist this emerging group in making their college choice decisions. Ironically, gaining proficiency in multiple SNSs is the primary prerequisite required for performing this type of research.

Practical implications. The results of this research could be of practical use to HEI professionals. For instance, practitioners who work in community colleges can use SNSs to highlight cost advantages offered by the community college, which could increase the community college's attractiveness to international students. The same tactic could be employed by other types of HEIs. In cases where HEIs present a lower tuition rate, availability of this financial information on SNSs could assist this institution in appearing more attractive due to its affordability. In addition, the presence of this information on SNSs would allow international students to make more informed decisions about colleges abroad.

Another recommendation is related to content development. HEIs should be able to employ designated individuals whose job it is to focus on developing consistent content for different SNSs. The quality content combined with the deliberate efforts to gain membership in different SNS social groups could lead to the increase in the number of "followers" and "likes," resulting in a higher institutional SNS rating and ranking.

Another recommendation is for practitioners from admission offices and alumnae offices to collaborate in creating and maintaining institutional alumnae groups on LinkedIn. The links to these groups could be added to HEI websites to answer some of the "employment after graduation" questions as well as student inquiries related to "value for money."

In addition, as SNSs continue to gain popularity, it could be helpful to update college application materials to include SNSs as one of the referral choices, incorporating specific “boxes” for most popular SNS, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LiveJournal, blogs, and local SNS. On the one hand, it would allow researchers to study correlations between students’ college choice and specific SNS, as a source of promotions and referral. On the other hand, it could help higher education professionals to strategize their recruitment efforts. For instance, they could hire individuals with self-reported interests and expertise in specific SNSs to populate the content of specific SNSs—Instagram or Facebook. These individuals should also be identified and selected based on their social network profiles, strong membership in social network groups, and robust trail of followers. The “experts” efforts in content generation could be instrumental in helping international students to be more effective in making their college choice and in gaining the social capital of a specific HEI while they are still in their own country making college choice decisions. This information could be particularly useful for students with no connections abroad.

Subpart 3. Research Question #3. Were there any connections between type of information available on SNSs and RSUH students’ choice of HEI in the US? The push-pull theory (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) has been widely used to describe types of information that guide international students’ decisions about studying abroad. This theory emphasizes that family, friends, social bonding, and social capital are among the promotional factors that help students make decisions about destinations and specific HEIs. Findings of this study confirm that the advice offered by family members and friends matters. Moreover, when answering the second research question, it became

apparent that, in addition to traditional friends, there are virtual, SNS friends whose suggestions and advices are equally impactful in guiding participants' decisions as advice offered by real-life friends or relatives.

In answering the third research question, it became apparent that the information obtained through SNSs impacted RSUH students' decisions and choices. For instance, Musician asked a question related to choice of major on one SNS. He received an answer from a complete stranger and it resulted in him selecting a major which he had never heard of before. None of Musician's real-life friends or family members could address Musician's needs because of their lack of knowledge on the subject. However, SNS membership is in the millions, and one of these millions had information that directed Musician to a major that met his aspirations. A similar situation was described by Prodigy. Unlike Musician, who simply posted a question for anyone to answer, Prodigy was more deliberate and "collaborated" with a particular SNS community—faculty members of Russian origin from several HEIs on the West Coast; however, similar to Musician's experience, advice offered by this particular group of SNS "friends" guided Prodigy choice of major. Prodigy did not have access to these people in real life and had no opportunity to meet them or to even know they existed. However, the structure of SNSs, namely groups, allowed Prodigy to find the "right" people, connect with them, appeal to their knowledge, and receive useful suggestions and recommendations. Furthermore, advice, stories, pictures, and other activities of SNS "friends" seemed to play a significant role in the participants' decisions as they related to confirming their decision to study abroad, selecting a major, and choosing a place of study.

Subpart 3. Research Question #3. Recommendations. More effective and targeted SNS use certainly seems to be instrumental in channeling international students' choice of majors and an HEI abroad. It seems particularly significant for students with no or limited connections abroad. HEI professionals could engage international and domestic students into creating a "friends" presence on different SNSs. The consistency and versatility of efforts is paramount. Consistency in making posts, writing comments, responding to questions, and partaking in other forms of SNS activities is important for building trust and connections. In addition, presence on various SNSs allows for a larger market share because different SNSs attract different population groups. Engaging not only international, but also domestic students provides a somewhat more multidimensional picture. Further research into these connections could translate into the development of better communication channels and, perhaps, a larger presence of international students on U.S. campuses.

Part 3. Recommendations and Barriers

Concerns.

Loss of control over content. One of the biggest limitations of SNSs is the loss of control over content; anyone can create an "official" college account on Facebook, Twitter, and other SNSs and share any type of information with users (Reuben, 2008). For instance, Mascari and Webber (2008) warned that students can use Facebook pages of their college of interest "to get any number of college application essays designed to match your personality and grades... To get the inside scoop on partying, drugs, sex, and cheating" (p. 4).

Similar concerns are connected with the use of blogs and comments made on SNSs. Negativity in bloggers' commentaries can easily and instantly change readers' opinion about anything (Solis, 2008), including their perception of an HEI. Reuben (2008) stated, "If your university had a Facebook page, a MySpace page, or uses any of these other tools, there are forums for comments that have the chance of collecting negative remarks and feedback" (p. 7). In the NAFSA-run live conversation with college recruiters, Bennett (2011) made similar comments and emphasized that "in social media you no longer control the message—it's about joining the conversation" (p. 2).

These valid concerns have been expressed repeatedly by HEI professionals. However, even if a decision is made to completely avoid the use of SNSs, the HEI is still vulnerable to negative comments that students and others can post on their own SNS accounts. Therefore, the goal of HEI professionals is not to avoid or ignore SNSs, but rather to adapt, learn, and move forward, which can be achieved through consistent and conscientious posting of timely, relevant, and student-centered content on their institutional SNS. These actions should assist in increasing institutional visibility, dispelling myth, building interest in the institution, and improving social media ranking and rating by increasing the number of followers. As a result, these activities could overshadow any negative comments and create ground for admissions-related conversations. In summary, admissions personnel—students, social media specialists, and admissions counselors—should become "family and friends" for international students and provide them with the necessary "promotional" guidance to assist in their college choice.

Time constraints. HEI enrollment personnel are often charged with many different duties, which creates barriers to their finding time to acquire fluency in SNS functions. Investing time into learning new technologies and cultures, maintaining SNS content, responding to messages, following tweets and blogs, participating in group discussion, and sharing and generating new ideas on not just one, but on several different SNS pages and platforms, in addition to these individuals' regular duties, might be, and usually are, time prohibitive. In addition, many admission officers report not having enough competencies to develop content that would be relevant to the needs of international students. As a result, HEI enrollment personnel are having difficulty building an SNS presence that would attract foreign candidates to their social media pages (Missy, 2011; Thostenson, 2011).

In addition, not only do these HEI professionals have to invest time into learning about SNS features, they also must learn about different cultures and the various ways in which international students obtain and process information, as knowledge of at least some of these cultural competencies is needed to create culture-tailored content. They must also be cognizant of expectations and limitations specific to students of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Obtaining these competencies and expertise requires training and time commitment.

Dearth of available research. The skyrocketing evolution of SNSs and the breathtaking speed of their development surpasses the corresponding research. Currently, the majority of information is available through secondary sources, such as blogs, SNS posts and group discussions, forums, podcasts, YouTube videos, webinars, and various Internet sites related to the use of specific SNSs. However, more primary, contemporary

scientific articles are needed. Research literature that is more than a year old could already be in danger of becoming obsolete. This is an area in which it is clearly difficult to find relevant research. HEI enrollment professionals may need to rely on consultants.

Conclusion

Given the limited financial resources and the pressure for HEIs to find effective ways to attract students, including international students, knowing about how foreign students obtain information that impacts their college choice decision has become extremely important. This research study informs HEI professionals, admissions counselors, and enrollment management about the different ways in which international students manipulate SNSs for their college choice activities. It also brings to light a new group of students whose participation in transferring to an HEI abroad became possible only as a result of information channels available through different SNS. These students are either geographically removed from having regular access to traditional forms of college information, or are skeptical about these traditional sources of information because of their country's system of beliefs and traditions. Social media and SNSs, which they find easy to use, trustworthy, and reliable, have become their primary platforms for communication.

As a summary of my findings, based on the observations mentioned above, there are five major recommendations—listed alphabetically and not in order of importance—that can be implemented by HEI professionals to strengthen their connections with international students.

Expertise. The deliberate use of SNSs can assist enrollment officers in directing international students during the last stage of a decision-making process—selection of an

HEI abroad. To do so, the professionals either have to invest time in developing fluency in different features of various SNSs or employ current students and consultants who exhibit this proficiency through their social media behavior. As each social SNS represents a specific appeal to different population groups, competencies in specific SNS characteristics are very important. Self-reported competencies should be supported by the evidence of consultants' presence and status on SNSs.

Consistency. Professionals who work with SNSs should be able to develop and maintain consistent content. Awareness of what is being said on various social network platforms, as well as quick and consistent reactions to questions, assist in building bonds with potential students and addressing their need to stay connected.

Content. In addition to being consistent, content also needs to be meaningful and genuine. When users become wary of repetitive, albeit consistent, posts and shared links, they lose trust and exit. Hiring individuals with an expertise in generating SNS-specific content, which must be short, meaningful, visual, and unique, can be the best tactic for reaching out to international students. Journalism or media studies programs could be helpful in identifying these persons.

One size does not fit all. Each social network site has its own specific features that appeal to specific SNS users. Different individuals usually appreciate different SNS features and develop their allegiance toward one or two networks. I would recommend avoiding hiring general social media specialists or consultants, but instead employing narrowly focused individuals to maintain content on one or two sites on which they demonstrate having the largest and the most visible presence. Interdepartmental

collaboration, such as, for instance, alumnae relationships and admissions, can make the biggest impact.

Proactive approach. Specialists working with SNSs should be encouraged to join different SNS groups, actively participate in these groups' discussions, initiate group discussions, engage with "leaders of public opinions" (LPO), and take all necessary steps to create a proactive visibility online. These activities can be helpful in reaching out to students who do not proactively seek information, but take a more passive approach.

Research. More research with a focus on specific SNSs, various topics, and population groups from different countries is needed. Particular attention should be paid to different ethnic groups and their activities on the SNS giants, such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Expanding this study to other nationalities would also be worth pursuing. The cultural, political, and economic circumstances of different nations may change the outcomes of responses. It also seems beneficial to expand this research to international students who are already enrolled to study at different HEIs abroad, for instance, in the US. This would produce a more informed comparison, and the analysis would be enhanced by a better understanding of the pathways international students take to gather information when selecting HEIs abroad.

This study has revealed some interesting findings that can shed light on how international students use SNSs to make decisions about selecting HEIs abroad, particularly in the US. Results have implications for further research as well as for improving recruitment and admissions practices.

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APPENDIX 1

- ☐ I am interested in participation in this study (mark if you are).

Participants Questionnaire

NAME _____

Cell phone _____ E-mail _____

Year of Study _____ 1 _____ 2

1. I recently have taken a TOEFL test (mark one):

☐ Yes

☐ No

My score is _____

2. I am scheduled to take a TOEFL test (mark one)

☐ Yes

☐ No

Date and Place _____

3. I recently attended an information session with the representatives from any of the organizations below (mark appropriate)

☐ American Councils,

☐ International Education Fair in Radisson Slavyanskaja

☐ ICEF Information session

☐ UGRAD Program,

☐ Information sessions offered by representatives of a Foreign University/s (please provide name/s of these university/s _____)

☐ Other (please specify in the space provided _____)

4. I participated in the English Language program abroad

☐ Yes

☐ No

Name of the institution

5. I participated in the FLAS program

☐ Yes

☐ No

(if answered “yes”, please answer the next question)

6. I participated in FLAS program and have taken an SAT while there.

☐ Yes

☐ No

SAT Score

7. Have you already applied to a higher education institution abroad?

☐ Yes

☐ No

8. Are you in a process of deciding what higher education institution abroad to apply?

☐ Yes

☐ No

9. What tool(s) you were using to search for higher education abroad? (You can mark more than one tool from a list below).

☐ Attended information sessions offered by different colleges

☐ Attended other information sessions (please specify)

- ☐ Searched Internet for information about different colleges
- ☐ Searched social network sites for information about different colleges
- ☐ Talked to faculty who worked at different colleges abroad
- ☐ Talked to friends, acquaintances, family members...

Other _____

APPENDIX 2

Guiding Questions for the Interview

1. Introduction
 - a. Brief explanation of the study
 - b. Tell me about yourself
2. Tell me more about your plans to transfer.
3. What made you decide to transfer and why to a university outside of Russia?
4. Can you tell me where you are now in your transferring process?
5. What factors are you considering as you decide what university to attend?
6. How are you collecting information about universities abroad?
7. What have the 1-2 universities done to make you think that it/they would be a good university to attend?
8. Can you tell me what sources of information you used?

Depending on the answer, I will probe more and ask: “Have you used any other sources of information? Why?”
9. In your answers you have mentioned using Social Network Sites (*I expect respondents will mention it, because this is purposeful sampling and students are invited to participate based on the survey's results*). Can you tell me more about why you are using them?
10. Can you tell me more about different features of SNS?
11. How were these features helping your search?

12. I am interested to know what you think of different SNS: Twitter, VKontakte, Facebook, Google+, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, other? What you like or dislike about them? Why?
13. Can you tell me more about college related information you were finding on SNS?
14. Can you tell me more about college related information you were finding in other sources?
15. What do you like and dislike about all these sources of information?
16. When you think about all of the information you have received or sought out what has been the most influential in your decision –making?
17. Can you explain “Why”?
18. How would you evaluate them?
19. If someone asks you what source or sources of information he or she should use to find about colleges, what would you recommend?
20. Can you tell me why?

APPENDIX 3

RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Consent for Participation in Social and Behavioral Research

☐ I consent to participating in a research study focused on learning how undergraduate students in Russia are using social network sites for finding information about colleges in the United States.

This research is intended to develop a better understanding of how students in Russian universities are using social network sites for college choice.

I have been informed that:

- I must be at least 18 years old.
 - My participation is completely voluntary.
 - I will be interviewed by the researcher for approximately 60 minutes •
- My interview will be audio taped and transcribed (typed). Tapes will be secured in the researcher's office and destroyed upon the conclusion of the study.
- My responses are confidential. My identity will be known only to the researcher and I will be identified by a pseudonym in research findings.
 - I will be provided with opportunities to read and revise my own statements, transcriptions of the interviews, and the researcher's interpretation of my responses.
 - I am free to discontinue participation in the study at any time.
 - I may refuse to answer any question.
 - There are no foreseen risks to participating in this study.
 - My decision to participate in the study (or not) will not impact my relationship to Russian State University for Humanities (RSUH) in any way (e.g., grades or class standing).
 - Interviews will take place in the Russian -American center
 - This study, and my participation in it, can result in a better understanding of the Russian students experience with social network sites.
 - I may have a copy of this signed form if I wish.

☐ I agree to participate in this study and sign this consent form freely and voluntarily.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact Natalia Rekhter at nrekhter@lincolncollege.edu or nrekhter@iupui.edu

NATALIA I. REKHTER
e-mail: nrekhter@yahoo.com

EDUCATION:

Indiana University, School of Education, Bloomington, IN **June, 2017**
PhD in Higher Education and Students Affairs
Dissertation Topic:
Using Social Network Sites for Recruitment of International Students.

University of Michigan, School of Public Health, Ann Arbor, Michigan **May 1998**
Master of Health Services Administration

State University of Ivanovo, School of Education, Ivanovo, Russia
<http://www.ivanovo.ac.ru/win1251/english/index.htm>
Master of Education. Philology **June 1989**
Bachelor in Russian Language and Literature. **June 1988**

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

FULBRIGHT SPECIALIST

Award by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA) and the Council for International Exchange of Scholars.

1. Award: "New Admission and Recruitment Strategies". Training program for admission officers at the Southern Federal University, Russia www.sfedu.edu **2016**
2. Award "Versatile strategies for attracting students in the new market Environment."
Site: Russia State University for Humanities (RSUH): www.rggu.com **2013, 2014**

SAINT MARY-OF-THE-WOODS COLLEGE, St. Mary of the Woods, IN **08/15-present**
Director. Master of Health Services Administration Program
Internship Director

- Analyzed market for development of adult- focused, on-line HSA program
- Conducted MHA promotion through community outreach
- Developed curriculum, Established Director's Advisory Board
- Hired faculty. Conducting faculty orientation, training and evaluation
- Directed Internship program. Assured students 100% placement and career advancement
- Taught graduate and undergraduate courses on-line and in hybrid environment:

MHA 520 US Healthcare System

MHA 530 Healthcare Human Resource Management

MHA 641 US Healthcare Legal System

MHA 674 Healthcare Strategic Management System

MHA 672 Contemporary Issues in Healthcare Ethics

MHA 680 Capstone

LINCOLN COLLEGE, Normal, IL **08/08-07/15**
Director. Bachelor of Science in Health Services Administration (HSA)

- Led efforts in creating HSA program mission, objectives, curriculum and learning outcomes
- Created strategic plan for Center for Adult Learning-Accelerated Bridges to Education (ABE) of Lincoln College
- Marketed Adult Learning Programs (ABE) and collaborated with admission office for student recruitment
- Established and convened HSA Program's Advisory Board.
- Collaborated with health care community in developing Internship opportunities.
- Directed Internship program.
- Chaired Students Support and Advocacy initiative
- Recruited and hired adjunct faculty, oversaw professional development
- Trained adjunct faculty in using Blackboard and Angell platforms for on-line course delivery
- Designed course modules for on-line, weekend, and hybrid courses delivery
- Initiated, created and implemented an on-line Certificate in Dental Services Management
- Taught in hybrid and on-line format ten (10) different courses, including high impact courses, such as capstone and Internship.
- Served on College strategic planning committee on reaching strategic enrollment and growth targets
- Served on College Assessment Committee, Faculty Committee, and Undergraduate Committee

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PURDUE UNIVERSITY, Indianapolis, IN 01/03-08/08
Trustee Lecturer, School of Public and Environmental Affairs
Adjunct Lecturer **08/08-08/13**

TEACHING

Created and taught one-on-one, on-line and hybrid undergraduate and graduate courses:

H 623 Applied Healthcare Administration (capstone)
 PBHL H 472 Applied Healthcare Administration
 PBHL H 120 Contemporary Healthcare Issues
 H515 Seminar in Healthcare: Special Topic (Global Health Care Dialog)
 H 515 Seminar in Healthcare: Special Topic (Health Care Ethics seminar)
 PBHL H320 Health Services Administration
 PBHL H375 Management of Health Services Organizations
 H516 Health Services Delivery and the Law
 H523 Health Services Human Resource Management
 H515 Seminar in Healthcare: Special Topic International Health Care. Field Experience
 in Russia Internship in Health Care Management
 PBHL H441 Legal Aspect of Healthcare Administration
 H 521 Managing Services in US Health Care Systems
 H 630 Reading in Health Services Administration

SERVICE

- Developed and directed Study Abroad program in Russia. Promoted program to academic community within and outside Indiana University (2005-2011).
- Developed and directed "Pathway to Profession" program for undergraduate students.
- Led collaboration with the Crispus Attucks Indianapolis inner city health magnet school.
- Supervised Obesity Outreach program (AmeriCorps Site Supervisor). Consulted to the Indiana State Department of Health on Obesity prevention program development
- Served on the University International Affairs Strategic Planning Committee and on International Committee
- Provided Student Advising to 80 students per year
- Organized, financed and hosted administrative training program for medical providers from Russia

- Co-hosted training program for public administrator from republic of Kazakhstan
- Served on the Health Administration Curriculum Development Committee

EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY. Ypsilanti, MI

08/00-01/03

Career Service Office Director. EMU College of Health and Human Services

- Directed Career Center at the College of Health and Human Services
- Managed cooperative education programs. Achieved a record high number of co-ops, internships, and full-time placements in assigned majors.
- Participated in developing educational partnership with the Sakha Republic

Clinical Faculty (1/2 time position). College of Health and Human Services

- Created and delivered courses in Health Care Finance, Insurance and Finance, Health Care Legal System, and Health Care Systems (capstone course) for graduate students.
- Developed and implemented program “From Industry to Classroom to Industry”.
- Provided academic advising and career advising.

MERCY HEALTH SERVICES (MHS). Farmington Hills, MI

06/97-09/00

CIO Associate. Mercy Information Services-MIS.

- Served as a liaison between Chief Informational Officer and 12 Mercy’s health care systems
- Facilitated development of the educational programs in Northern Caucasus, Russia. Coordinated recruitment, marketing, community outreach, designed educational materials, established collaborative relationships with local authorities and experts, monitored budget.
- Supervised MIS recruitment program and directed comprehensive staff development.

EMERSON SCHOOL. Ann Arbor, MI

08/92-08/95

Teacher of Russian Language and Culture

- Conducted research and wrote grant proposal for school administrators exchange program.
- Created and taught course on Russian Language and Culture for intermediate school students.
- Supervised exchange program for high school students from Russia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan.

GRANTS

American Educational Development/Open World Leadership Center. \$9,200

- Accountable Government Program. Providing Leadership Training for Government Officials from Saratov, Rostov on Don, Omsk and Tomsk regions of Russia.” PI, February, 2013

• **US Department of Education. Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education** “Advanced Language Learning/Global Public Health”

<http://www.indiana.edu/~iuslavic/healthcare/iu.shtml>

Co-PI. Grant received with Slavic Department of the Indiana University **\$499,000**

- **Open World Leadership Center.** Community Link Program. Theme: “Training Health Care Management Leaders from Tajikistan.” Principle Investigator, 2009. **\$17,200**

• **Indiana University. International Development Grant,** “Connection between alcohol consumption and HIV/AIDS related risky behavior among children and adolescents in rural Russia.” Principle Investigator. 2007 **\$7,500**

• **Indiana University Purdue University.** Lecturer Grant, 2007 **\$5,000**

• **International Research and Exchange Board (IREX) - Policy Connect Research** Grant for assessing AIDS related knowledge among children in rural Russia. Principle Investigator, 2005

<http://www.irex.org/programs/policy-connect/grantees/index.asp> **\$40,000**

- **Open World Leadership Center.** Community Link Program. Theme:

- “HIV/AIDS Prevention. Training Community Leaders from Russia. **\$8,000**
- **Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.** Travel Grant, **\$1,000**
 - **Eli Lilly Pharmaceutical Company.** International Initiative Grant to develop SPEA international exchange program. Principle Investigator, 2004 **\$15,000**
 - **Indiana University.** International Development Fund for establishing and running International Exchange Program for faculty and students, 2004 **\$10,000**
 - **International Research and Exchange Board (IREX)** – Regional Scholar Exchange. Principle Investigator, 2003 <http://www.irex.org/programs/rsep/grantees02.htm> **\$8,500**
 - **Eastern Michigan University** –International Development Grant, 2003 **\$5,000**
 - **Eastern Michigan University** – Innovative Grant to develop an Alumnae Connection Website for Allied Health majors, 2002

PUBLICATIONS

1. Rekhter, N., Goris, T. (2017). International students’ use of social network sites. Why and How? Rostov on Don, Southern Federal University: AcademLit.
http://www.management.sfedu.ru/images/docs/Article_for_Rostov_2017.pdf
2. Goris T., Rekhter N. (2017). Where we are? Females professionals in STEM fields on the North American Market. Rostov on Don, Southern Federal University: AcademLit.
http://www.management.sfedu.ru/images/docs/Tanyas_article.pdf
3. Rekhter, N. (2014). Lessons from a health care study abroad program. *Journal of Health Administration Education*. <https://us-mg5.mail.yahoo.com/neo/launch?reason=ignore&rs=1#mail>
4. Natalia Rekhter (2013, May). “Serfs” up. *Times Higher Education*.
<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/opinion/serfs-up/2003814.article>
5. Rekhter, N. (2012). Using social network sites for higher education marketing and recruitment. *International Journal of Technology and Educational Marketing (IJTEM)*.
<http://www.igi-global.com/article/using-social-network-sites-higher/65725>
6. Rekhter, N. (July, 2012). Russian students in the United States. Analysis of the last twenty years. *International Journal of Russian Studies*.
http://www.ijors.net/issue5_2_2012/articles/rekhter.html
7. Rekhter N., Anopchenko, T.U., & Murav’eva, H.H. (2011). Competition in the Sphere of Health Care. Case Study of Rostov Region. In N.U Skrjabina (Ed.), *Problems and Perspectives of Entrepreneurship Development in Russia* (p.p.240-242). Rostov on Don, Southern Federal University: AcademLit. (In Russian)
8. Pshegusova, G., & Rekhter, N. (2008). Concept of the International Distance Education. In T.A Tepojan (Ed.), *Development of research and educational distance partnership between Russian and American Universities* (p.p.189-207). Rostov on Don: Southern Federal University. (In Russian)
9. Natalia I. Rekhter, & Igor’ A. Togunov. Need Assessment for Health Care Management Education in Russia. *The Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Profession*. Volume 26, Issue 4, December 2006 http://www.jcehp.com/vol26/2604_rekhter.asp
10. Natalia I. Rekhter. Medical Education and the Physician Workforce in Russia. *The Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Profession*. Volume 26, Issue 4, December 2006.
11. Rekhter, N. Need Assessment for Healthcare Management Education in post-Soviet Russia. Conference proceeds. AUPHA Press, 2005.
<http://www.aupha.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3300>
12. Igor A. Togunov and Natalia I. Rekhter. Physicians and business component of health care delivery. Relationships and prejudices. <http://www.rusmedserv.com/zdrav/> (in Russian).

Zdravoohraneniye - HealthCare, Moscow, Russia, 2003.

13. Rekhter, N. Basic Principals of Teaching Health Services Management in the USA. Matching Supply and Demand. Materials of the 3rd Annual International Science Conference “Health and Education in New Millennium”. Moscow. Russia, 2002 (in Russian)

14. Igor A. Togunov and Natalia I. Rekhter. Physicians’ role in hospital operation. Materials of International Health Care Symposium “Health Care Quality Management.” Moscow. Russia, 2001 (in Russian)

PRESENTATIONS

- **Health Care Reforms in Russia. Example of the Rostov on Don Region.** June, 2015. AUPHA Annual Meeting
- **Conducting Successful Short-Term Study Abroad.** International Education Conference. Russian Humanitarian University. Invited speaker. April 11-14, 2013.
- **Russian Federation and United States: comparative analysis of disparities in population health.** International Education Conference. Russian Humanitarian University. April 11-14, 2012.
- **Challenges of Establishing Contemporary HSA Program.** AUPHA Undergraduate Workshop, October 2008
- **Using Experiential Learning to Develop Competencies in Healthcare Management.** AUPHA Annual Conference, Orlando, June 2007
<http://64.233.167.104/search?q=cache:qDAjVkV2lXgJ:www.aupha.org/files/public/CreativeInstruction.pdf+rekhter+natalia&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=5&gl=us>
- **Students Career Induction Process through Service-Learning Engagement.** Indiana Campus Compact 6th Annual Conference on Service and Engagement, Indiana State University, April, 2007
<http://www.aupha.org/files/public/AM07Rekhter.pdf>
- **Commentator.** Indiana Roundtable on Post-Communism Public Health. Indiana University, Bloomington. March, 2007 <http://www.iub.edu/~reeiweb/events/roundtable07.shtml>
- **Experiential Learning: The Career Induction Process.** AUPHA Undergraduate Workshop, Chicago, November, 2006 <http://www.aupha.org/files/public/AM07Rekhter.pdf>
- **Creative Instruction and Active Learning.** AUPHA Undergraduate Workshop, Chicago, 2006
- **HIV and AIDS in Modern Russia.** International Summer Teaching Institute. Indiana University, Bloomington, July 2006. <http://www.aupha.org/files/public/CreativeInstruction.pdf>
- **Comparative Analysis of Healthcare Management Education in the USA and Russia.** 16 Annual International Conference Alliance of Universities for Democracy, Yalta, Ukraine, October, 2005
- **Need Assessment for Healthcare Management Education in Russia. Regional Case Studies.** Presentation. AUPHA Annual Meeting, Boston, 2005
- **Challenges of Health Care Management Education in Post-Soviet Russia.** Annual International Social Science Conference, New Orleans, November, 2004
- **Basic Principals of Teaching Health Services Management in the USA. Matching Supply and Demand.** Keynote speaker. University of People Friendship. Moscow, Russia. 2002
- **Successful Career Navigation. Principles. Risks. Innovative Approach.** Invited Speaker. 3rd Annual International Students Business Association Conference. Ypsilanti, MI. 2002

HONORS AND AWARDS

- **Serve Indiana. State Award for Volunteerism.** 2016
- **Fulbright International Visiting Scholars Competition.** Reviewer. 2014- present
- **The Russian Academic Journal.** Editorial board. 2011- present
- **Indiana University, School of Education-** 2010 Proffitt Fellowship

- **Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis** - 2008 Favorite Professor
- **Mercy Information Services** - Annual Employee Recognition for the development of MIS Intranet Model
- **Chelsea Community Hospital Auxiliary Scholarship** – Auxiliary Scholarship for professional excellence
- **Federation of Russian Journalists** – two consequent annual Best Social Issues Article awards for article about regional physicians strike and article immigration of Russian Jews